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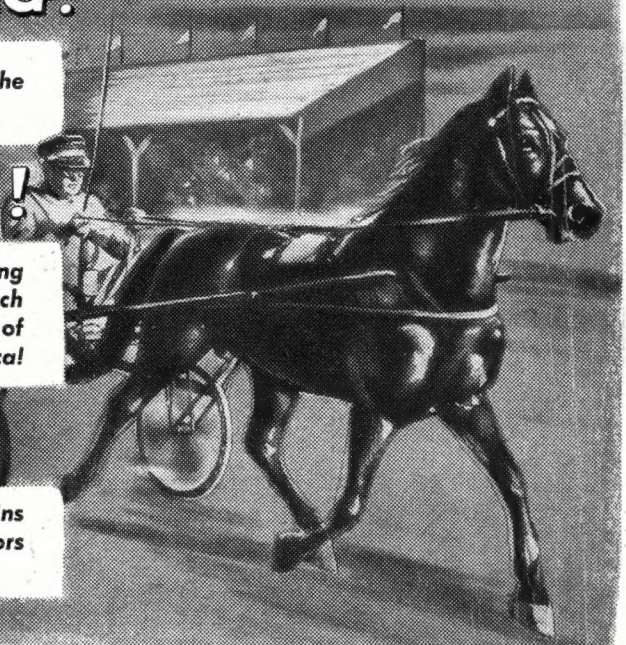

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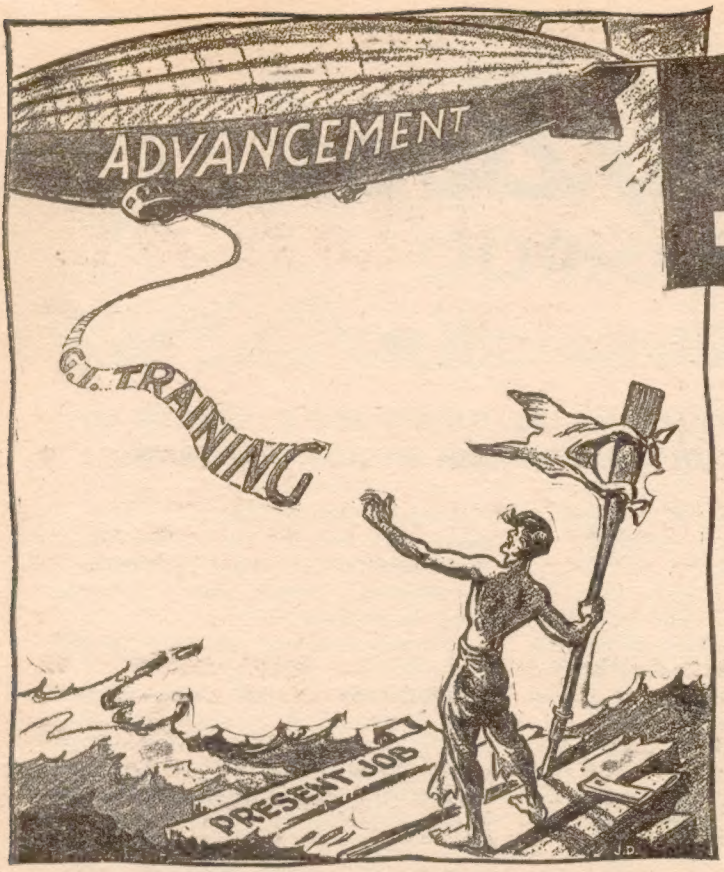

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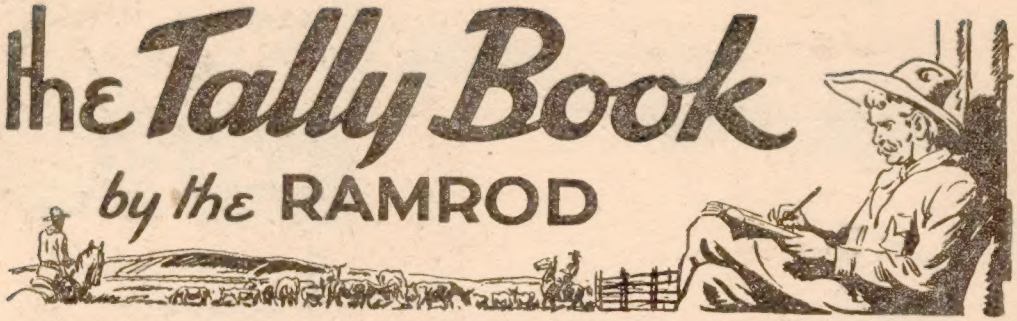

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WHAT would you do if you knew a man had killed your brother?

You'd figure ways of punishment for the killer, of course. Maybe even revenge, which is a mite different from punishment. But suppose the killer hadn't left his brand on the killing and there wasn't a shred of proof to take to the law? Would you take the law in your own hands?

That's the kind of situation that's more ticklish than a Missouri mule. And it's just the problem in next issue's featured novel, DRY CAMP, by James Charles Lynch and Todhunter Ballard.

Death is No Answer!

There weren't any nagging little doubts in Ward Gale's mind. He knew Matt Roberts had killed his brother and he wanted only one thing—to rid his heart of the poisonous hate that was in it by killing Roberts.

Ward Gale tracked Roberts to California where, on a river packet named *Cornucopia*, he met a little man named Morehouse who also hated Roberts.

"You'll never get a settlement out of Roberts now," Morehouse said. "He's too big and rich. Besides this packet line, he owns the express run to the southern mines and the stages. He owns a bank. All he has to do is lift his hand and he's got a hundred men to do his dirty work. You'll never get a dime out of Roberts."

"I don't want anything Roberts has," said Gale. "All I want to do is kill him."

"Kill him?" said Morehouse. "Why?"

Being essentially law-abiding, Gale had to have an answer to that question to justify his position and his reason for taking this course. But he had never framed the reason into words. There were too many facets to it and he realized, for the first time, he had simply lumped them together into a thing called hate.

"There's only one fit punishment," he said slowly.

"Punishment, yes," said Morehouse. "But where's the punishment in death? You talk like a child, Ward. Who are you to say death hurts a man? You hit him with a bullet and perhaps he's better off than he is now. Who knows? Roberts hurt you and your friends. For that you want to hurt Roberts. Killing him isn't the answer."

Impatience boiled up in Gale. "Words," he said. "Every time a man gets afraid of consequences, he falls back on words. I'm not afraid of the consequences of killing Matt Roberts."

A Partnership of Hate

Morehouse shook his head. "You keep missing the point. It's punishment you're working for. Now what will hurt Roberts most?"

"There's nothing a man wants to do more than live."

Morehouse flung his hands wide in disgust. "Where's your judgment? Roberts would risk his life for a thousand dollars. Life isn't what's dear to a man. It's what he owns that counts. A lot of men, who have lost everything, have killed themselves because of it. Use your head. Strip Roberts of everything he owns. Then, if you're not satisfied, after punishing him, kill him. But that will only be doing him a favor."

And so was born a partnership of hate,

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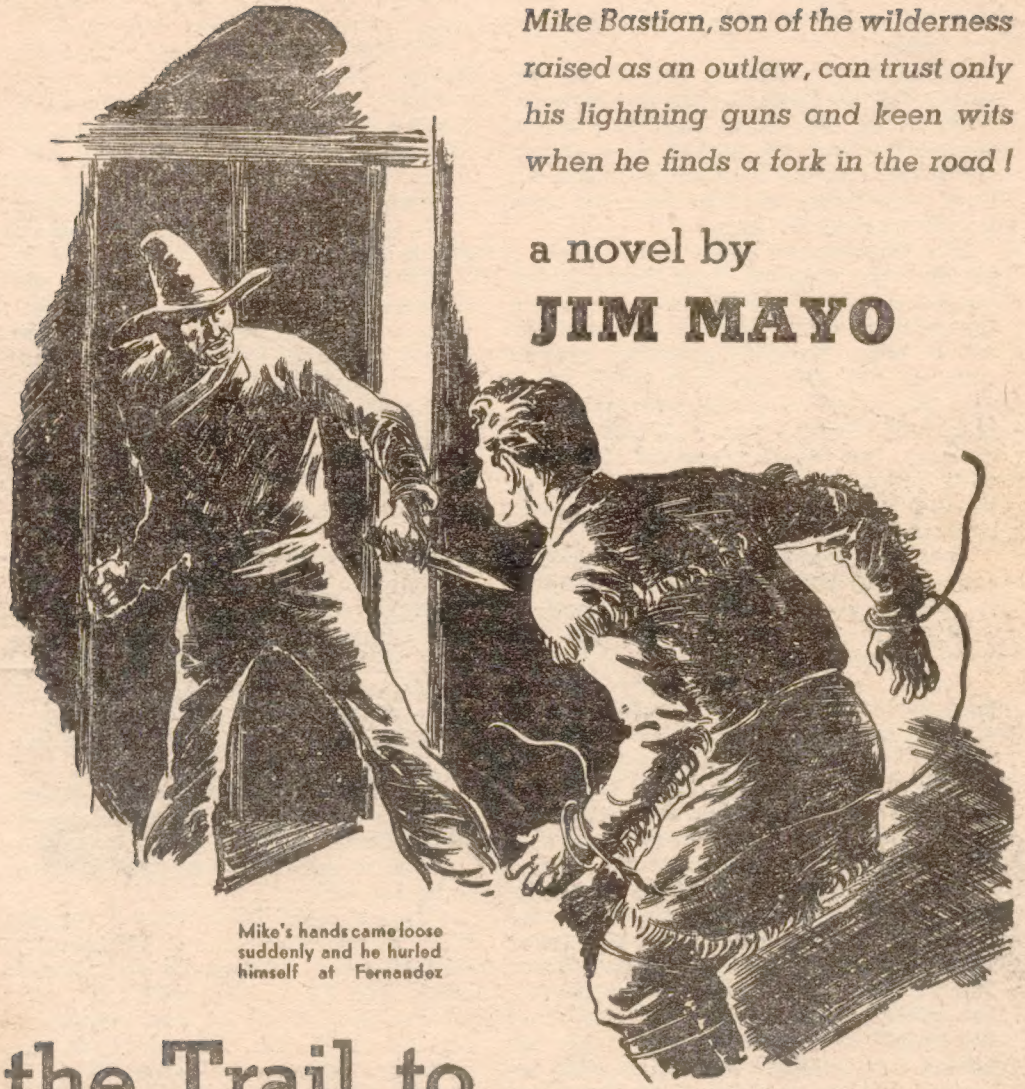


Mike's hands came loose suddenly and he hurled himself at Fernandez

the Trail to Peach Meadow Canyon

I

WINTER snows were melting in the forests of the Kaibab, and the red-and-orange hue of the thousand-foot Vermilion Cliffs was streaked with the dampness of melting frost. Deer were feeding in the forest glades among the stands of ponderosa and fir, and the trout were leaping in the streams. Where sunlight trailed through the webbed overhang of the leaves, the water danced and sparkled.

Five deer were feeding on the grass

along a mountain stream back of Finger Butte, their coats mottled by the light and shadow of the sun shining through the trees.

A vague something moved in the woods behind them and the five-pronged buck lifted his regal head and stared curiously about. He turned his nose into the wind, reading it cautiously. But his trust was betrayal, for the movement was downwind of him.

The movement came again and a young man stepped from concealment behind a huge fir not twenty feet from the nearest deer. He was straight and tall in gray, fringed buckskins, and he wore no hat. His hair was thick, black and wavy, growing full over the temples, and his face was lean and brown. Smiling, he walked toward the deer with quick, lithe strides, and had taken three full steps before some tiny sound betrayed him.

The buck's head came up and swung around, and then with a startled snort it sprang away, the others following.

Mike Bastian stood grinning, his hands on his hips.

"Well, what do you think now, Roundy?" he called. "Could y o u r Apache beat that? I could have touched him if I had jumped after him!"

Rance Roundy came out of the trees —a lean, wiry old man with a gray mustache and blue eyes that were still bright with an alert awareness.

"No, I'll be darned if any Apache ever lived as could beat that!" he chortled. "Not a mite of it! An' I never seen the day I could beat it, either. You're a caution, Mike, you sure are. I'm glad you're not sneakin' up after *my* hair!" He drew his pipe from his pocket and started stoking it with tobacco. "We're goin' back to Toadstool Canyon, Mike. Your dad sent for us."

Bastian looked up quickly. "Is there trouble, is that it?"

"No, only he wants to talk with you. Maybe—" Roundy was cautious— "he figures it's time you went out on a job. On one of those rides."

"I think that's it," Mike nodded. "He said in the spring, and it's about time for the first ride. I wonder where they'll go, this time?"

"No tellin'. The deal will be well planned, though. That dad of yours would have made a fine general, Mike. He's got the head for it, he sure has. Never forgets a thing, that one."

"You've been with him a long time, haven't you?"

"Sure—since before he found you. I knowed him in Mexico in the war, and that was longer ago than I like to think. I was a boy then, my ownself.

"Son," Roundy said suddenly, "look!"

He tossed a huge pine cone into the air, a big one at least nine inches long.

With a flash of movement. Mike Bastian palmed his gun and almost as soon as it hit his hand it belched flame —and again. The second shot spattered the cone into a bunch of flying brown chips.

"Not bad!" Roundy nodded. "You still shoot too quick, though. You got to get over that, Mike. Sometimes one shot is all you'll ever get."

SIDE by side the two walked through the trees, the earth spongy with a thick blanket of pine needles. Roundy was not as tall as Mike, but he walked with the long, springy stride of the woodsman. He smoked in silence for some distance, and then he spoke up.

"Mike, if Ben's ready for you to go out, what will you do?"

For two steps, Bastian said nothing. Then he spoke slowly. "Why, go, I guess. What else?"

"You're sure? You're sure you want to be an outlaw?"

"That's what I was raised for, isn't it?" There was some bitterness in Mike's voice. "Somebody to take over what Ben Curry started?"

"Yeah, that's what you were raised for, all right. But this you want to remember, Mike: It's your life. Ben Curry, for all his power, can't live it for you. Moreover, times have changed since Ben and me rode into this country. It ain't free and wild like it was, because folks are comin' in, settlin' it up, makin' homes. Gettin' away won't be so easy, and your pards will change, too. In fact, they have already changed.

"When Ben and me come into this country," Roundy continued, "it was every man for himself. More than one harum-scarum fella, who was otherwise all right, got himself the name of an outlaw. Nobody figured much about it,

then. We rustled cows, but so did half the big ranchers of the West. And if a cowpoke got hard up and stopped a stage, nobody made much fuss unless he killed somebody. They figured it was just high spirits. But the last few years, it ain't like that no more. And it ain't only that the country is growin' up—it's partly Ben Curry himself."

"You mean he's grown too big?" Mike put in.

"What else? Why, your dad controls more land than there is in New York

MIKE BASTIAN

State! Got it right under his thumb! And he's feared over half the West by those who know about him, although not many do.

"Outside of this country around us nobody ain't seen Ben Curry in years, not leastwise to know him. But they've heard his name, and they know that somewhere an outlaw lives who rules a gang of almost a thousand men. That he robs and rustles where he will, and nobody has nerve enough to chase him.

"He's been smart, just plenty smart," old Roundy went on. "Men ride out and they meet at a given point. The whole job is planned in every detail, it's rehearsed, and then they pull it and scatter and meet again here. For a long time folks laid it to driftin' cowpunchers or to gangs passin' through. The way he's set up, one of the gangs he sends out might pull somethin' anywhere from San Antone to Los Angeles, or from Canada to Mexico, although usually he handles it close around.

"He's been the brains, all right, but don't ever forget it was those guns of his that kept things in line. Lately, he hasn't used his guns. Kerb Perrin and Rigger Molina or some of their boys handle the discipline. He's become too big, Ben Curry has. He's like a king, and the king isn't getting any younger. How do you suppose Perrin will take it when he hears about you takin' over? You think he'll like it?"

"I don't imagine he will," Mike replied thoughtfully. "He's probably done some figuring of his own."

"You bet he has! So has Molina, and neither of them will stop short of murder to get what they want. Your dad still has them buffaloed, I think, but that isn't going to matter when the showdown comes. And I think it's here!"

"You do?" Mike said, surprise in his voice.

"Yeah, I sure do!" Roundy hesitated. "You know, Mike, I never told you this, but Ben Curry has a family."

"A family?" Despite himself, Mike Bastian was startled.

"Yes, he has a wife and two daughters, and they don't have any idea he's an outlaw. They live down near Tucson somewhere. Occasionally, they come to a ranch he owns in Red Wall Canyon, a ranch supposedly owned by Voyle Ragan. He visits them there."

"Does anybody else know this?"

"Not a soul. And don't you be tellin' anybody. You see, Ben always wanted a son, and he never had one. When your real dad was killed down in Mesilla, he took you along with him, and later he told me he was going to raise you to take over whatever he left. That was a long time ago, and since then he's spent a sight of time and money on you.

"You can track like an Apache," Roundy said, looking at the tall lad beside him. "In the woods you're a ghost, and I doubt if old Ben Curry himself can throw a gun any faster than you. I'd say you could ride anything that wore hair, and what you don't know

about cards, dice and roulette wheels ain't in it. You can handle a knife, fight with your fists, and you can open anything a man ever made in the way of safes and locks. Along with that, you've had a good education, and you could take care of yourself in any company. I don't reckon there ever was a boy had the kind of education you got, and I think Ben's ready to retire."

gerous, that one. He's poison mean and power-crazy. He'd have gone off the deep end a long time ago if it wasn't for Ben Curry. And Rigger Molina is kill-crazy. He would have killed fifty men if it hadn't been that he knew Ben Curry would kill him when he got back. No, neither of them could handle this outfit. The whole shebang would go to pieces in ninety days if they had it."

Perrin saw flame blossom from a gun in Bastian's hand and a hard object slugged him

"You mean, to join his wife and daughters?" Mike questioned.

"That's it. He's gettin' no younger, and he wants it easy-like for the last years. He was always scared of only one thing, and he had a lot of it as a youngster. That's poverty. Well, he's made his pile and now he wants to step out. Still and all, he knows he can't get out alive unless he leaves somebody behind him that's strong enough and smart enough to keep things under control. That's where you come in."

"Why don't he let Perrin have it?"

"Mike, you know Perrin. He's dan-

Mike Bastian walked along in silence. There was little that was new in what Roundy was saying, but he was faintly curious as to the old man's purpose. The pair had been much together, and they knew each other as few men ever did. They had gone through storm and hunger and thirst together, living in the desert, mountains and forest, only rarely returning to the rendezvous in Toadstool Canyon.

Roundy had a purpose in his talking and Bastian waited, listening. Yet even as he walked he was conscious of everything that went on around him. A quail

had moved back into the tall grass near the stream, and there was a squirrel up ahead in the crotch of a tree. Not far back a gray wolf had crossed the path only minutes ahead of them.

It was as Roundy had said. Mike was a woodsman, and the thought of taking

over the outlaw band filled him with unease. Always, he had been aware this time would come, that he had been schooled for it. But before, it had seemed remote and far off. Now, suddenly, it was at hand, it was facing him.

"Mike," Roundy went on, "the country is growin' up. Last spring some of our raids raised merry hell, and some of the boys had a bad time gettin' away. When they start again, there will be trouble and lots of it. Another thing: folks don't look at an outlaw like they used to. He isn't just a wild young cowhand full of liquor, nor a fellow who needs a poke, nor somebody buildin' a spread of his own. Now, he'll be like a wolf, with every man huntin' him. Before you decide to go into this, you think it over, make up your own mind.

"You know Ben Curry, and I know you like him, Well, you should! Nevertheless, Ben had no right to raise you for an outlaw. He went his way of his own free will, and if he saw it that way, that was his own doin'. But no man has a right to say to another, 'This you must do; this you must be.' No man has a right to train another, startin' before he has a chance to make up his mind, and school him in any particular way."

The old man stopped to relight his pipe, and Mike kept a silence, would let Roundy talk out what seemed to bother him.

"I think every man should have the right to decide his own destiny, in so far as he can," Roundy said, continuing his trend of thought. "That goes for you, Mike, and you've got the decision ahead of you. I don't know which you'll do. But if you decide to step out of this gang, then I don't relish bein' around when it happens, for old Ben will be fit to be tied.

"Right now, you're an honest man. You're clean as a whistle. Once you be-

come an outlaw, a lot of things will change. You'll have to kill, too—don't forget that. It's one thing to kill in defense of your home, your family, or your country. It's another thing when you kill for money or for power."

"You think I'd have to kill Perrin and Molina?" Mike Bastian asked.

"If they didn't get you first!" Roundy spat. "Don't forget this, Mike: You're fast. You're one of the finest, and aside from Ben Curry probably the finest shot I ever saw. But that ain't shootin' at a man who's shootin' at you. There's a powerful lot of difference, as you'll see!

"Take Billy the Kid, this Lincoln County gunman we hear about. Frank and George Coe, Dick Brewer, Jesse Evans—any one of them can shoot as good as him. The difference is that the part down inside of him where the nerves should be was left out. When he starts shootin' and when he's bein' shot at, he's like ice! Kerb Perrin's that way, too. Perrin's the cold type, steady as a rock. Rigger Molina's another kind of cat—he explodes all over the place. He's white-hot, but he's deadly as a rattler."

Mike was listening intently as Roundy continued his description:

"Five of them cornered him one time at a stage station out of Julesburg. When the shootin' was over, four of them were down and the fifth was holdin' a gun-shot arm. Molina, he rode off under his own power. He's a shaggy wolf, that one! Wild and uncurried and big as a bear!"

FAR MORE than Roundy realized did Mike Bastian know the facts about Ben Curry's empire of crime. For three years now, Curry had been leading his foster son through all the intricate maze of his planning. There were spies and agents in nearly every town in the Southwest, and small groups of outlaws quartered here and there on ranches who could be called upon for help at a moment's notice.

Also, there were ranches where fresh horses could be had, and changes of clothing, and where the horses the band had ridden could be lost. At Toadstool Canyon were less than two hundred of the total number of outlaws, and many of those, while living under Curry's protection, were not of his band.

Also, the point Roundy raised had been in Mike's mind, festering there, an abscess of doubt and dismay. The Ben Curry he knew was a huge, kindly man, even if grim and forbidding at times. He had taken the homeless boy and given him kindness and care; had, indeed, trained him as a son. Today, however, was the first inkling Mike had of the existence of that other family. Ben Curry had planned and acted with shrewdness and care.

Mike Bastian had a decision to make, a decision that would change his entire life, whether for better or worse.

Here in the country around the Vermilion Cliffs was the only world he knew. Beyond it? Well, he supposed he could punch cows. He was trained to do many things, and probably there were jobs awaiting such a man as himself.

He could become a gambler, but he had seen and known a good many gamblers and did not relish the idea. Somewhere beyond this wilderness was a larger, newer, wealthier land—a land where honest men lived and reared their families.

II

IN THE massive stone house at the head of Toadstool Canyon, so called because of the gigantic toadstool-like stone near the entrance, Ben Curry leaned his great weight back in his chair and stared broodingly out the door over the valley below.

His big face was blunt and unlined as rock, but the shock of hair above his leonine face was turning to gray. He was growing old. Even spring did not bring the old fire to his veins again, and it had been long since he had ridden out on one of the jobs he planned so shrewdly. It was time he quit.

Yet, for a man who had made decisions sharply and quickly, he was for the first time in his life, uncertain. For six years he had ruled supreme in this remote corner north of the Colorado. For twenty years he had been an outlaw, and for fifteen of those twenty years he had ruled a gang that grew and extended its ramifications until it was an empire in itself.

Six years ago he had moved to this remote country and created the stronghold where he now lived. Across the southern limit rolled the Colorado

River, with its long canyons and maze of rocky wilderness, a bar to any pursuit from the country south of the river where he operated.

Only at Lee's Ferry was there a crossing, and in a cabin nearby his men watched it, night and day. That is, it was the only crossing known to other men. There were two more crossings—one that the gang used in going to and from their raids, and the other known only to himself. It was his ace-in-the-hole, even if not his only one.

One law of the gang, never transgressed, was that there was to be no lawless activity in the Mormon country to the north of them. The Mormons and the Indians were left strictly alone, and were their friends. So were the few ranchers who lived in the area. These few traded at the stores run by the gang, and bought their supplies close to home and at cheaper prices than they could have managed elsewhere.

Ben Curry had never quite made up his mind about Kerb Perrin. He knew that Perrin was growing restive, that he was aware that Curry was aging and was eager for the power of leadership. Yet the one factor Curry couldn't be certain about was whether Perrin would stand for the taking over of the band by Mike Bastian.

Well, Mike had been well trained; it would be his problem. Ben smiled grimly. He was the old bull of the herd, and Perrin was pawing the dirt, but what would he say when a young bull stepped in? One who had not won his spurs with the gang?

That was why Curry had sent for him, for it was time Mike be groomed for leadership, time he moved out on his first job. And he had just the one. It was big, it was sudden, and it was dramatic. It would have an excellent effect on the gang if it was brought off smoothly, and he was going to let Mike plan the whole job himself.

There was a sharp knock outside, and Curry smiled a little, recognizing it.

"Come in!" he bellowed.

He watched Perrin stride into the room with his quick, nervous steps, his eyes scanning the room.

"Chief," Perrin said, "the boys are gettin' restless. It's spring, you know, and most of them are broke. Have you got anything in mind?"

"Sure, several things. But one that's good and tough! Struck me it might be a good one to break the kid in on."

"Oh?" Perrin's eyes veiled. "You mean he'll go along?"

"No, I'm going to let him run it. The whole show. It will be good for him."

Kerb Perrin absorbed that. For the first time, he felt worry. For the first time, an element of doubt entered his mind. He had wondered before about Bastian and what his part would be in all this.

For years, Perrin had looked forward to the time when he could take over. He knew there would be trouble with "Rigger" Molina, but he had thought that phase of it out. He knew he could handle it. But what if Curry was planning to jump young Bastian into leadership?

Quick, hot passion surged through Perrin, and when he looked up, it was all he could do to keep his voice calm.

"You think that's wise?" he questioned. "How will the boys feel about goin' out with a green kid?"

"He knows what to do," Curry said. "They'll find he's smart as any of them, and he knows plenty. This is a big job, and a tough one."

"Who goes with him?"

"Maybe I'll let him pick them," Curry said thoughtfully. "Good practice for him."

"What's the job?" Perrin asked, voice sullen.

"The gold train!"

PERRIN'S fingers tightened, digging into his palms. This was the job *he* wanted! The shipment from the mines! It would be enormous, rich beyond anything they had done!

Months before, in talking of this job, he had laid out his plan for it before Curry. But it had been vetoed. He had recommended the killing of every man-jack of them, and burial of them all, so the train would vanish completely.

"You sound like Molina," Curry had said chuckling. "Too bloody!"

"Dead men don't talk!" he had replied grimly.

"That will be tough for the kid," Perrin said now, slowly. "Mighty tough!"

Yet, even as he spoke he was thinking of something else. He was thinking of the effect of this upon the men of the outfit. He knew many of them liked Mike Bastian, and more than one of

them had helped train him. In a way, many of the older men were as proud of Mike as if he had been their own son. If he stepped out now and brought off this job, he would acquire power and prestige in the gang equal to Perrin's own.

Fury engulfed Perrin. Curry had no right to do this to him! Sidetracking him for an untried kid. Shoving Bastian down all their throats!

Suddenly, the rage died and in its place came resolution. It was time he acted on his own. He would swing his own job, the one he had had in mind for so long, and that would counteract the effect of the gold-train steal. Moreover, he would be throwing the challenge into Ben Curry's teeth, for he would plan this job without consulting him. If there was going to be a struggle for leadership, it could begin here and now.

"He'll handle the job all right," Curry said confidently. "He has been trained, and he has the mind for it. He plans well. I hadn't spoken of it before, but I asked his advice on a few things without letting him know why, and he always came through with the right answers."

Kerb Perrin left the stone house filled with burning resentment but also something of triumph. At last, after years of taking orders, he was going on his own. Yet the still, small voice of fear was in him, too. What would Ben Curry do?

The thought made him quail. He had seen the cold fury of Curry when it was aroused, and he had seen him use a gun. He himself was fast, but was he as fast as Ben Curry? In his heart, he doubted it. He dismissed the thought, although storing it in his mind. Something would have to be done about Ben Curry. . .

MIKE BASTIAN stood before Ben Curry's table and the two men stared at each other.

Ben Curry, the old outlaw chief, huge, bearlike and mighty, his eyes fierce yet glowing with a kindly light now, and something of pride, too. Facing him, tall and lithe, his shoulders broad and mighty, was Mike Bastian, child of the Frontier grown to manhood and trained in every art of the wilds, every dishonest practice in the books, every skill with weapons. Yet educated, too, a man who could conduct himself well in any company.

"You take four men and look over the ground yourself, Mike," Ben Curry was saying. "I want you to plan this one. The gold train leaves the mines on the twentieth. There will be five wagons, the gold distributed among them, although there won't be a lot of it as far as quantity is concerned. That gold train will be worth roughly five hundred thousand dollars.

"When that job is done," he continued, "I'm going to step down and leave you in command. You knew I was planning that. I'm old, and I want to live quietly for awhile, and this outfit takes a strong hand to run it. Think you can handle it?"

"I think so," Mike Bastian said softly.

"I think so, too. Watch Perrin—he's the snaky one. Rigger is dangerous, but whatever he does will be out in the open. Not so Perrin. He's a conniver. He never got far with me because I was always one jump ahead of him. And I still am!"

The old man was silent for a few minutes, as he stared out the window.

"Mike," he said then, doubt entering his voice, "maybe I've done wrong. I meant to raise you the way I have. I ain't so sure what is right and wrong, and never was. Never gave it much thought, though.

"When I come west it was dog eat dog and your teeth had to be big. I got knocked down and kicked around some, and then I started taking big bites myself. I organized, and then I got bigger. In all these years nobody has ever touched me. If *you've* got a strong hand, you can do the same. Sometimes you'll have to buy men, sometimes you'll have to frighten them, and sometimes you'll have to kill."

He shook his head as if clearing it of memories past, then glanced up.

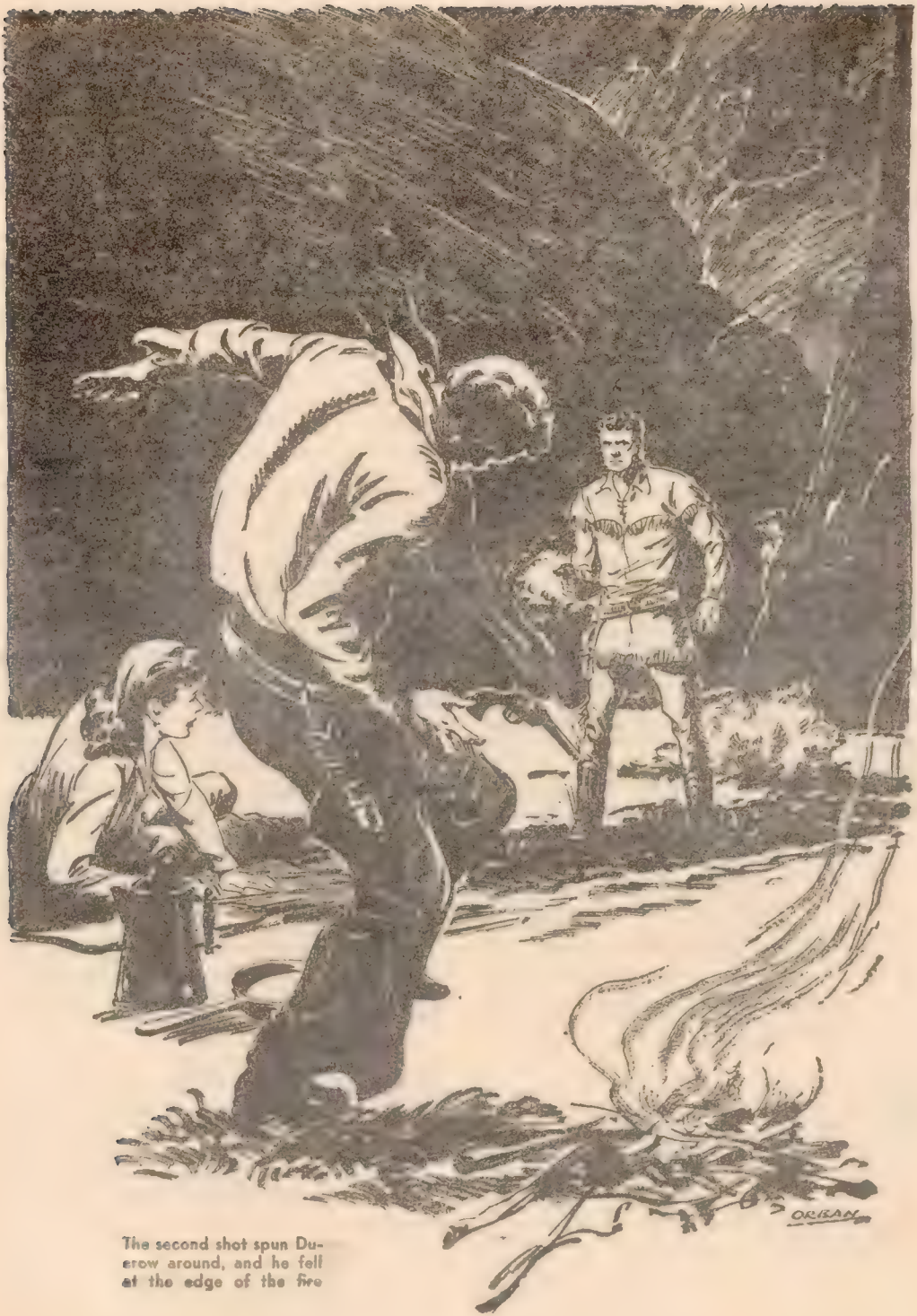
"Who will you take with you?" he asked. "I mean, in scouting this layout."

Ben Curry waited, for it was judgment of men that Bastian would need most. It pleased him that Mike did not hesitate.

"Roundy, Doc Sawyer, Colley and Garlin."

Curry glanced at him, his eyes hard and curious. "Why?"

"Roundy has an eye for terrain like no man in this world," Mike said. "He



The second shot spun Durow around, and he fell at the edge of the fire

says mine's as good, but I'll take him along to verify or correct my judgment. Doc Sawyer is completely honest. If he thinks I'm wrong, he'll say so. As for Colley and Garlin, they are two of the best men in the whole outfit. They will be pleased that I ask their help, which puts them on my side in a measure, and they can see how I work."

Curry nodded. "Smart—and you're right. Colley and Garlin are two of the best men, and absolutely fearless." He smiled a little. "If you have trouble with Perrin or Molina, it won't hurt to have them on your side."

DESPITE himself, Mike Bastian was excited. He was twenty-two years old and by Frontier standards had been a man for several years. But in all that time, aside from a few trips into the Mormon country and one to Salt Lake, he had never been out of the maze of canyons and mountains north of the Colorado.

Roundy led the way, for the trail was an old one to him. They were taking the secret route south used by the gang on their raids, and as they rode toward it, Mike stared at the country. He was always astonished by its ruggedness.

Snow still lay in some of the darker places of the forest, but as they neared the canyon the high cliffs towered even higher and the trail dipped down through a narrow gorge of rock. Countless centuries of erosion had carved the rock into grotesque figures resembling those of men and animals, colored with shades of brown, pink, gray and red, and tapering off into a pale yellow. There were shadowed pools among the rocks, some from snow water and others from natural springs, and there were scattered clumps of oak and piñon.

In the bottom of the gorge the sun did not penetrate except at high noon, and there the trail wound along between great jumbled heaps of boulders, cracked and broken from their fall off the higher cliffs.

Mike Bastian followed Roundy, who rode hump-shouldered on a ragged, gray horse that seemed as old as he himself, but as sure-footed and mountainwise. Mike was wearing a black hat now, but his same buckskins. He had substituted boots for the moccasins he usually wore, although they reposed in his saddlebags, ready at hand.

Behind them rode "Doc" Sawyer, his lean, saturnine face quiet, his eyes faintly curious and interested as he scanned the massive walls of the canyon. "Tubby" Colley was short and thick-chested, and very confident—a hard-jawed man who had been a first-rate ranch foreman before he shot two men and hit the outlaw trail.

"Tex" Garlin was tall, rangy and quiet. He was a Texan, and little was known of his background, although it was said he could carve a dozen notches on his guns if he wished.

Suddenly, Roundy turned the gray horse and rode abruptly at the face of the cliff, but when close up, the sand and boulders broke and a path showed along the under-scoured rock. Following this for several hundred yards they found a canyon that cut back into the cliff itself, then turned to head toward the river.

The roar of the Colorado, high with spring freshets, was loud in their ears before they reached it. Finally they came out on a sandy bank littered with driftwood.

Nearby was a small cabin and a plot of garden. The door of the house opened and a tall old man came out.

"Howdy!" he said. "I been expectin' somebody." His shrewd old eyes glanced from face to face, then hesitated at sight of Mike. "Ain't seen you before," he said pointedly.

"It's all right, Bill," Roundy said. "This is Mike Bastian."

"Ben Curry's boy?" Bill stared. "I heard a sight of you, son. I sure have! Can you shoot like they say?"

Mike flushed. "I don't know what they say," he said, grinning. "But I'll bet a lot of money I can hit the side of that mountain if it holds still."

Garlin stared at him thoughtfully, and Colley smiled a little.

"Don't take no funnin' from him," Roundy said. "That boy can shoot!"

"Let's see some shootin', son," Bill suggested. "I always did like to see a man who could shoot."

Bastian shook his head. "There's no reason for shootin'," he protested. "A man's a fool to shoot unless he's got cause. Ben Curry always told me never to draw a gun unless I meant to use it."

"Go ahead," Colley said, "show him."

Old Bill pointed. "See that black stick end juttin' up over thar? It's about

fifty, maybe sixty paces. Can you hit it?"

"You mean that one?" Mike palmed his gun and fired, and the black stick pulverized.

It was a movement so smooth and practiced that no one of the men even guessed he had intended to shoot, and Garlin's jaws stopped their calm chewing and he stared with his mouth open for as long as it took to draw a breath. Then he glanced at Colley.

"Wonder what Kerb would say to that?" he said, astonished. "This kid can shoot!"

"Yeah," Colley agreed, "but the stick didn't have a gun!"

Old Bill worked the ferry out of a cave under the cliff and freighted them across the swollen river in one hair-raising trip. With the river behind, they wound up through the rocks and started south.

III

THE mining and cowtown of Weaver was backed up near a large hill on the banks of a small creek. Colley and Garlin rode into the place at sundown, and an hour later Doc Sawyer and Roundy rode in.

Garlin and Colley were leaning on the bar having a drink, and they ignored the newcomers. Mike Bastian followed not long afterward, and walked to the bar alone.

Most of those in the saloon were Mexicans, but three tough-looking white men lounged against the bar nearby. They glanced at Mike and his buckskins, and one of them whispered something to the others, at which they all laughed.

Doc Sawyer was sitting in a poker game, and his eyes lifted. Mike leaned nonchalantly against the bar, avoiding the stares of the three toughs who stood near him. One of them moved over closer.

"Hi, stranger!" he said. "That's a right purty suit you got. Where could I get one like it?"

Garlin looked up and his face stiffened. He nudged Colley. "Look!" Garlin said quickly. "Corbus and Fletcher! An' trouble huntin'! We'd better get into this!"

Colley shook his head. "No. Let's see what the kid does."

Mike looked around, his expression mild. "You want a suit like this?" he inquired of the stranger. His eyes were innocent, but he could see the sort of man he had to deal with. These three were toughs, and dangerous. "Most any Navajo could make one for you."

"Just like that?" Corbus sneered.

He was drinking and in a nagging, quarrelsome mood. Mike looked altogether too neat for his taste.

"Sure! Just like this," Mike agreed. "But I don't know what you'd want with it, though. This suit would be pretty big for you to fill."

"Huh?" Corbus' face flamed. Then his mouth tightened. "You gettin' smart with me, kid?"

"No." Mike Bastian turned and his voice cracked like a whip in the suddenly silent room. "Neither am I being hurrahed by any lame-brained, liquor-guzzling saddle tramp! You made a remark about my suit, and I answered it. Now, you can have a drink on me, all three of you, and I'm suggesting you drink up." His voice suddenly became soft. "I want you to drink up because I want to be very, very sure we're friends, see?"

Corbus stared at Bastian, a cold hint of danger filtering through the normal stubbornness of his brain. Something told him this was perilous going, yet he was stubborn, too stubborn. He smiled slowly. "Kid," he drawled, "supposin' I don't want to drink with no tenderfoot brat?"

Corbus never saw what happened. His brain warned him as Mike's left hand moved, but he never saw the right. The left stabbed his lips and the right cracked on the angle of his jaw, and he lifted from his feet and hit the floor on his shoulder blades, out cold.

Fletcher and the third tough stared from Corbus to Mike. Bastian was not smiling. "You boys want to drink?" he asked. "Or do we go on from here?"

Fletcher stared at him. "What if a man drawed a gun instead of usin' his fists?" he demanded.

"I'd kill him," Bastian replied quietly.

Fletcher blinked. "I reckon you would," he agreed. He turned, said, "Let's have a drink. That Boot Hill out there's already got twenty graves in it."

Garlin glanced at Colley, his eyebrows lifted. Colley shrugged.

"I wonder what Corbus will do when he gets up?" he said.

Garlin chuckled. "Nothin' today. He won't be feelin' like it!"

Colley nodded. "Reckon you're right, an' I reckon the old man raised him a wildcat! I can hardly wait to see Kerb Perrin's face when we tell him."

"You reckon," Garlin asked, "that what we heard is true? That Ben Curry figures to put this youngster into his place when he steps out?"

"Yep, that's the talk," Colley answered.

"Well, maybe he's got it. We'll sure know before this trip is over."

NOISE of the stagecoach rolling down the street drifted into the saloon, and Mike Bastian strolled outside and started toward the stage station. The passengers were getting down to stretch their legs and to eat. Three of them were women.

One of them noticed Mike standing there and walked toward him. She was a pale, pretty girl with large gray eyes.

"How much farther to Red Wall Canyon?" she inquired.

Mike Bastian stiffened. "Why, not far. That is, you'll make it by morning if you stick with the stage. There is a crosscountry way if you had you a buckboard, though."

"Could you tell us where we could hire one? My mother is not feeling well."

He stepped down off the boardwalk and headed toward the livery stable with her. As they drew alongside the stage, Mike looked up. An older woman and a girl were standing near the stage, but he was scarcely aware of anything but the girl. Her hair was blondish, but darker than that of the girl who walked beside him, and her eyes, too, were gray. There the resemblance ended, for where this girl beside him was quiet and sweet, the other was vivid.

She looked at him and their eyes met. He swept off his hat. The girl beside him spoke.

"This is my mother, Mrs. Ragan, and my sister Drusilla." She looked up at him quickly. "My name is Juliana."

Mike bowed. He had eyes only for Drusilla, who was staring at him.

"I am Mike Bastian," he said.

"He said he could hire us a rig to drive across country to Red Wall Canyon," Juliana explained. "It will be quicker that way."

"Yes," Mike agreed, "much quicker. I'll see what I can do. Just where in Red Wall did you wish to go?"

"To Voyle Ragan's ranch," Drusilla said. "The V Bar."

He had turned away, but he stopped in midstride.

"Did you say . . . Voyle Ragan's?"

"Yes. Is there anything wrong?" Drusilla stared at him. "What's the matter?"

He regained his composure swiftly. "Nothing. Only, I'd heard the name, and"—he smiled—"I sort of wanted to know for sure, so if I came calling."

Juliana laughed. "Why, of course! We'd be glad to see you."

He walked swiftly away. These, then, were Ben Curry's daughters! That older woman would be his wife! He was their foster brother, yet obviously his name had meant nothing to them. Neither, he reflected, would their names have meant anything to him nor the destination, had it not been for what Roundy had told him only the previous day.

Drusilla, her name was. His heart pounded at the memory of her, and he glanced back through the gathering dusk at the three women standing there by the stage station.

Hiring the rig was a matter of minutes. He liked the look of the driver, a lean man, tall and white-haired. "No danger on that road this time of year," the driver said. "I can have them there in no time by takin' the canyon road."

Drusilla was waiting for him when Mike walked back.

"Did you find one?" she asked, then listened to his explanation and thanked him.

"Would it be all right with you," Mike said, "if I call at the V Bar?"

She looked at him, her face grave, but a dancing light in her eyes. "Why, my sister invited you, did she not?"

"Yes, but I'd like you to invite me, too."

"I?" She studied him for a minute. "Of course, we'd be glad to see you. My mother likes visitors as well as Julie and I, so won't you ask her, too?"

"I'll take the invitation from you and your sister as being enough." He grinned. "If I ask your mother, I might have to ask your father!"

"Father isn't with us!" she laughed. "We'll see him at Ragan's. He's a rancher somewhere way up north in the

wilds. His name is Ben Ragan. Have you heard of him?"

"Seems to me I have," he admitted, "but I wouldn't say for sure."

After they had gone Mike wandered around and stopped in the saloon, after another short talk with a man at the livery stable. Listening and asking an occasional question, he gathered the information he wanted on the gold shipment. Even as he asked the questions, it seemed somehow fantastic that he, of all people, should be planning such a thing.

Never before had he thought of it seriously, but now he did. And it was not only because the thought went against his own grain, but because he was thinking of Drusilla Ragan.

What a girl she was! He sobered suddenly. Yet, for all of that, she was the daughter of an outlaw. Did she know it? From her question, he doubted it very much.

DOC SAWYER cashed in his chips and left the poker game to join Mike at the bar.

"The twentieth, all right," he said softly. "And five of them are going to carry shotguns. There will be twelve guards in all, which looks mighty tough. The big fellow at the poker table is one of the guards, and all of them are picked men."

Staring at his drink, Mike puzzled over his problem. What Roundy had said was of course, true. This was a turning point for him. He was still an honest man, yet when he stepped over the boundary it would make a difference. It might make a lot of difference to a girl like Dru Ragan, for instance.

The fact that her father also was an outlaw would make little difference. Listening to Sawyer made him wonder. Why had such a man, brilliant, intelligent, and well educated, ever become a criminal?

Sawyer was a gambler and a very skillful one, yet he was a doctor, too, and a fine surgeon. His education was as good as study and money could make it, and it had been under his guidance that Mike Bastian had studied.

"Doc," he said suddenly, "whatever made you ride a crooked trail?"

Sawyer glanced at him suddenly, a new expression in his eyes. "What do you mean, Mike? Do you have doubts?"

"Doubts? That seems to be all I do have these last few days."

"I wondered about that," Doc said. "You have been so quiet that I never doubted but what you were perfectly willing to go on with Ben Curry's plans for you. It means power and money, Mike—all a man could want. If it is doubt about the future for outlaws that disturbs you, don't let it. From now on it will be political connections and bribes, but with the money you'll have to work with, that should be easy."

"It should be," Mike said slowly. "Only maybe—just maybe—I don't want to."

"Conscience rears its ugly head!" Sawyer smiled ironically. "Can it be that Ben Curry's instructions have fallen on fallow ground? What started this sudden feeling? The approach of a problem? Fear?" Doc had turned toward Mike and was staring at him with aroused interest. "Or," he added, "is there a woman? A girl?"

"Would that be so strange?"

"Strange? But no! I've wondered it hasn't happened before, but then you've lived like a recluse these past years. Who is she?"

"It doesn't matter," Mike answered. "I was thinking of this before I saw her. Wondering what I should do."

"Don't ask me," Sawyer said. "I made a mess of my own life. Partly a woman and partly the desire for what I thought was easy money. Well, there's no such a thing as easy money, but I found that out too late. You make your own decision. What was it Matthew Arnold said? I think you learned the quotation."

" 'No man can save his brother's soul, or pay his brother's debt'."

"Right! So you save your own and pay your own. There's one thing to remember, Mike. No matter which way you go, there will be killing. If you take over Ben Curry's job, you'll have to kill Perrin and Molina, if you can. And you may have to kill them, and even Ben Curry, if you step out."

"Not Dad," Mike said.

"Don't be sure. It isn't only what he thinks that matters, Mike. No man is a complete ruler or dictator. His name is only the symbol. He is the mouthpiece for the wishes of his followers, and as long as he expresses those wishes, he leads them. When he fails, he falls. Ben

Curry is the boss not only because he has power in him, but also because he has organization, because he has made them money, because he has offered them safety. If you left, there would be a chink in the armor. No outlaw ever trusts another outlaw who turns honest, for he always fears betrayal."

Bastian tossed off his drink. "Let's check with Roundy. He's been on the prowl."

Roundy came to them hastily. "We've got to get out of town, quick!" he said. "Ducrow and Fernandez just blew in and they are drunk and raisin' the devil. Both of them are talkin', too, and if they see us they will spill everything!"

"All right." Mike straightened. "Get our horses. Get theirs, too, we'll take them with us."

Garlin and Colley had come to the bar. Garlin shook his head. "Ducrow's poison mean when he's drunk, and Fernandez sides him in everything," Garlin informed. "When Ducrow gets drunk he always pops off too much! The Boss forbade him weeks ago to come down here."

"He's a pal of Perrin's," Colley said, "so he thinks he can get away with it."

"Here they come now!" Roundy exclaimed.

"All right—drift!" Bastian ordered. "Make it quick with the horses."

IV

SALOON doors slammed open and the two men came in. One look, and Mike could see there was cause for worry. Tom Ducrow was drunk and ugly, and behind him was "Snake" Fernandez. They were an unpleasant pair, and they had made their share of trouble in Ben Curry's organization, though always protected by Perrin.

Bastian started forward, but he had scarcely taken a step when Ducrow saw him.

"There he is!" he bellowed loudly. "The pet! The Boss' pet!" He stared around at the people in the barroom. "You know who this man is? He's—"

"Ducrow!" Mike snapped. "Shut up and go home. Now!"

"Look who's givin' orders!" Ducrow sneered. "Gettin' big for your britches, ain't you?"

"Your horses will be outside in a minute," Mike said. "Get on them and start back, fast!"

"Suppose," Ducrow sneered, "you make me!"

Mike had been moving toward him, and now with a pantherlike leap he was beside the outlaw and with a quick slash from his pistol barrel, floored him.

With an oath, Snake Fernandez reached for a gun, and Mike had no choice. He shot him in the shoulder. Fernandez staggered, the gun dropping from his fingers. Mouthing curses, he reached for his left-hand gun.

But even as he reached, Garlin—who had stayed behind when the others, went for the horses—stepped up behind him. Jerking the gun from the man's holster, he spun him about and shoved him through the door.

Mike pulled the groggy Ducrow to his feet and pushed him outside after Fernandez.

A big man got up hastily from the back of the room. Mike took one quick glimpse at the star on his chest.

"What goes on here?" the sheriff demanded.

"Nothing at all," Mike said affably. "Just a couple of the boys from our ranch feeling their oats a little. We'll take them out and off your hands."

The sheriff stared from Mike to Doc Sawyer and Colley, who had just come through the door.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "I don't believe I know you hombres."

"That's right, sir, you don't," Mike said. "We're from the Mogollons, riding back after driving some cattle through to California. It was a rough trip, and this liquor here got to a couple of the boys."

The sheriff hesitated, looking sharply from one to the other.

"*You* may be a cowhand," he said, "but *that* hombre"—he pointed to Sawyer—"looks like a gambler!"

Mike chuckled. "That's a joke on you, boy!" he said to Doc. Then he turned back to the sheriff. "He's a doctor, sir, and quite a good one. A friend of my boss'."

A gray-haired man got up and strolled alongside the sheriff. His eyes were alive with suspicion.

"From the Mogollons?" he queried. "That's where I'm from. Who did you say your boss was?"

Doc Sawyer felt his scalp tighten, but Mike smiled.

"Jack McCardle," he said, "of the Flying M. We aren't his regular hands, just a bunch passing through. Doc, here, he being an old friend of Jack's, handled the sale of the beef."

The sheriff looked around.

"That right, Joe?" he asked the gray-haired man. "There a Flying M over there?"

"Yes, there is." Joe was obviously puzzled. "Good man, too, but I had no idea he was shipping beef!"

The sheriff studied Bastian thoughtfully. "Guess you're all right," he said finally. "But you sure don't *talk* like a cowhand."

"As a matter of fact," Mike said swallowing hard, "I was studying for the ministry, but my interests began to lead me in more profane directions, so I am afraid I backslid. It seems," he said gravely, "that a leaning toward poker isn't conducive to the correct manner in the pulpit!"

"I should say not!" the sheriff chuckled. "All right, son, you take your pardners with you, let 'em sleep it off."

Mike turned, and his men followed him. Ducrow and Fernandez had disappeared. They rode swiftly out of town and took the trail for Toadstool Canyon. It wasn't until they were several miles on the road that Sawyer glanced at Mike.

"You'll do," he said. "I was never so sure of a fight in my life!"

"That's right, Boss!" Garlin said. "I was bettin' we'd have to shoot our way out of town! You sure smooth-talked 'em. Never heard it done prettier!"

"Sure did," Colley agreed. "I don't envy you havin' Ducrow an' Fernandez for enemies, though."

KERB PERRIN and Rigger Molina were both in conference with Ben Curry when Mike Bastian came up the stone steps and through the door. They both looked up sharply.

"Perrin," Bastian said, "what were Ducrow and Fernandez doing in Weaver?"

"In Weaver?" Perrin straightened up slowly, nettled by Mike's tone, but puzzled, too.

"Yes, in Weaver! We nearly had to shoot our way out of town because of them. They were down there, drunk and talking too much. When I told them to get on their horses and go home, they made trouble."

Kerb Perrin was on dangerous ground. He well knew how harsh Ben Curry was about talkative outlaws, and while he had no idea what the two were doing in Weaver, he knew they were trouble-makers. He also knew they were supporters of his. Ben Curry knew it, and so did Rigger Molina.

"They made trouble?" Perrin questioned now. "How?"

"Ducrow started to tell who I was."

"What happened?"

Mike was aware that Ben Curry had tipped back in his chair and was watching him with interest.

"I knocked him down with a pistol barrel," he said.

"You *what?*" Perrin stared. Ducrow was a bad man to tangle with. "What about Fernandez?"

"He tried to draw on me, and I put a bullet in his shoulder."

[*Turn page*]

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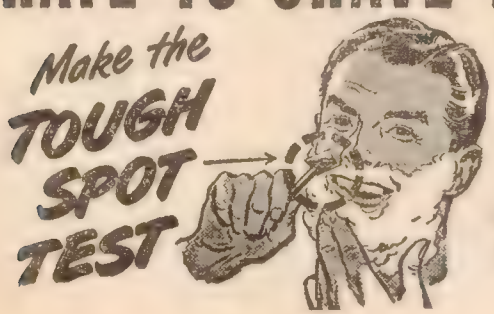

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"You should've killed him," Molina said. "You'll have to, sooner or later."

Kerb Perrin was stumped. He had not expected this, or that Mike Bastian was capable of handling such a situation. He was suddenly aware that Doc Sawyer had come into the room.

Bastian faced Ben Curry. "We got what we went after," he said, "but another bad break like Ducrow and Fernandez, and we'd walk into a trap!"

"There won't be another!" Curry said harshly.

When Mike had gone out, Doc Sawyer looked at Ben Curry and smiled.

"You should have seen him and heard him," he said as Molina and Perrin were leaving. "It would have done your heart good! He had a run-in with Corbus and Fletcher, too. Knocked Corbus out with a punch and backed Fletcher down. Oh, he'll do, that boy of yours, he'll do! The way he talked that sheriff out of it was one of the smoothest things I've seen!"

Ben Curry nodded with satisfaction. "I knew it! I knew he had it!"

Doc Sawyer smiled, and looked up at the chief from under his sunburned eyebrows. "He met a girl, too."

"A girl? Good for him! It's about time!"

"This was a very particular girl, Chief," Sawyer continued. "I thought you'd like to know. If I'm any judge of men, he fell for her and fell hard. And I'm not so sure it didn't happen both ways. He told me something about it, but I had already seen for myself."

Something in Sawyer's tone made Curry sit up a little.

"Who was the girl?" he demanded.

"A girl who came in on the stage." Doc spoke carefully, avoiding Curry's eyes now. "He got the girl and her family a rig to drive them out to a ranch. Out to the V Bar."

Ben Curry's face went white. So Doc knew! It was in every line of him, every tone of his voice. The one thing he had tried to keep secret, the thing known only to himself and Roundy, was known to Doc! And to how many others?

"The girl's name," Doc continued, "was Drusilla Ragan. She's a beautiful girl."

"Well, I won't have it!" Curry said in a strained voice.

Doc Sawyer looked up, faintly curious. "You mean the foster son you raised isn't good enough for your daughter?"

"Don't say that word here!" Curry snapped, his face hard. "Who knows besides you?"

"Nobody of whom I am aware," Doc said with a shrug. "I only know by accident. You will remember the time you were laid up with that bullet wound. You were delirious, and that's why I took care of you myself—because you talked too much."

Doc lighted his pipe. "They made a nice-looking pair," he said. "And I think she invited him to Red Wall Canyon."

"He won't go! I won't have any of this crowd going there!"

"Chief, that boy's what you made him, but he's not an outlaw yet," Doc said, puffing contentedly on his pipe. "He could be, and he might be, but if he does, the crime will lie on your shoulders."

Curry shook himself and stared out the window.

"I said it, Chief: the boy has it in him," Sawyer went on. "You should have seen him throw that gun on Fernandez. The kid's fast as lightning! He thinks, too. If he takes over this gang, he'll run this country like you never ran it. I say, *if*."

"He'll do it," Curry said confidently, "you know he will. He always does what I tell him."

Doc chuckled. "He may, and again he may not. Mike Bastian has a mind of his own, and he's doing some thinking. He may decide he doesn't want to take over. What will you do then?"

"Nobody has ever quit this gang. Nobody ever will!"

"You'd order him killed?"

BEN CURRY hesitated. This was something he had never dreamed of. Something— "He'll do what he's told!" he repeated, but he was no longer sure.

A tiny voice of doubt was arising within him, a voice that made him remember the Mike Bastian who was a quiet, determined little boy who would not cry, a boy who listened and obeyed. Yet now Curry knew, and admitted it for the first time, that Mike Bastian always had a mind of his own.

Never before had the thought occurred to him that Mike might disobey,

that he might refuse. And if he did, what then? It was a rule of the outlaw pack that no man could leave it and live. It was a rule essential to their security. A few had tried, and their bodies now lay in Boot Hill. But Mike, his son? No, not Mike!

Within him there was a deeper knowledge, an awareness that here his interests and those of the pack would divide. Even if he said no, they would say yes.

"Who would kill him, Chief? Kerb Perrin? Rigger Molina? You?" Doc Sawyer shook his head slowly. "You *might* be able to do it, maybe one of the others, but I doubt it. You've created the man who may destroy you, Chief, unless you join him."

Long after Doc Sawyer was gone, Ben Curry sat there staring out over the shadowed valley. He was getting old. For the first time he was beginning to doubt his rightness, beginning to wonder if he had not wronged Mike Bastian.

And what of Mike and Dru, his beloved, gray-eyed daughter? The girl with dash and spirit? But why not? Slowly, he thought over Mike Bastian's life. Where was the boy wrong? Where was he unfitted for Dru? By the teachings given him on his, Curry's, own suggestion? His own order? Or was there yet time?

Ben Curry heaved himself to his feet and began to pace the carpeted floor. He would have to decide. He would have to make up his mind, for a man's life and future lay in his hands, to make or break.

What if Dru wanted him anyway, outlaw or not? Ben Curry stopped and stared into the fireplace. If it had been Julie now, he might forbid it. But Dru? He chuckled. She would laugh at him. Dru had too much of his own nature, and she had a mind of her own.

* * * * *

Mike Bastian was restless the day after the excitement in Weaver. He rolled out of his bunk and walked out on the terrace. Only he and Doc Sawyer slept in the stone house where Ben Curry lived. Roundy was down in town with the rest of them, but tonight Mike wanted to walk, to think.

There had been a thrill of excitement in outtalking the sheriff, in facing down Fletcher, in flattening Corbus. And there had been more of it in facing Ducrow and Fernandez. Yet, was that what he wanted? Or did he want something more stable, more worthwhile? The something he might find with Drusilla Ragan?

Already, he had won a place with the gang. He knew the story would be all over the outlaw camp now.

Walking slowly down the street of the settlement, he turned at right angles and drifted down a side road. He wanted to get away from things for a little while, to think things out. He turned again and started back into the pines, and then he heard a voice coming from a near-by house. The words halted him.

". . . at Red Wall." Mike heard the ending.

Swiftly, he glided to the house and flattened against the side. Kerb Perrin was speaking:

"It's a cinch, and we'll do it on our own without anybody's say-so. There's about two thousand cattle in the herd, and I've got a buyer for them. We can hit the place just about sunup. Right now, they have only four hands on the place, but about the first of next month they will start hiring. It's now or not at all."

"How many men will we take?" That was Ducrow speaking.

"A dozen. That will keep the divvy large enough, and they can swing it. Hell, that Ragan ranch is easy! The boss won't hear about it until too late, and the chances are he will never guess it was us."

"I wouldn't want him to," Fernandez said.

"To hell with him!" Ducrow was irritated. "I'd like a crack at that Bastian again."

"Stick with me," Perrin said, "and I'll set him up for you. Curry is about to turn things over to him. Well, we'll beat him to it."

"You said there were girls?" Ducrow suggested.

"There's two white girls and a couple of Mexican girls who work there. One older woman. I want one of those girls myself—the youngest of the Ragan sisters. What happens to the others is none of my business."

Mike Bastian's hand dropped to his gun and his lips tightened. The tone of Perrin's voice filled him with fury, and Ducrow was as bad.

"What happens if Curry does find out?" Ducrow demanded.

"What would happen?" Perrin said fiercely. "I'll kill him like I've wanted to all these years! I've hated that man like I never hated anyone in my life!"

"What about that Bastian?" Ducrow demanded.

Perrin laughed. "That's your problem! If you and Fernandez can't figure to handle him, then I don't know you."

"He knocked out Corbus, too," Ducrow said. "We might get him to throw in with us, if this crowd is all afraid of old Ben Curry."

"I ain't so sure about him my ownself," said another voice, which Mike placed as belonging to an outlaw named Bayless. "He may not be so young any more, but he's hell on wheels with a gun!"

"Forget him!" Perrin snapped. Then: "You three, and Clatt, Panelli, Monson, Kiefer and a few others will go with us. All good men. There's a lot of dissatisfaction, anyway. Molina wants to raid the Mormons. They've a lot of rich stock and there's no reason why we can't sell it south of the river, and the other stock north of it. We can get rich!"

V

MIKE BASTIAN waited no longer, but eased away from the wall. He was tempted to wait for Perrin and brace him when he came out. His first thought was to go to Ben Curry, but he might betray his interest in Drusilla and the time was not yet ripe for that. What would her father say if he found the foster son he had raised to be an outlaw was in love with his daughter?

It was foolish to think of it, yet he couldn't help it. There was time between now and the twentieth for him to get back to Red Wall and see her.

A new thought occurred to him. Ben Curry would know the girls and their mother were here and would be going to see them! That would be his chance to learn of Ben's secret pass to the river bank, and how he crossed the Colorado.

Recalling other trips, Bastian knew the route must be a much quicker one than any he knew of, and was probably farther west and south, toward the canyon country. Already he was eager to see the girl again, and all he could think of was her trim figure, the laughter in her eyes, the soft curve of her lips.

There were other things to be considered. If there was as much unrest in the gang as Perrin said, things might be nearing a definite break. Certainly, outlaws were not the men to stand hitched for long, and Ben Curry had commanded them for longer than anyone would believe. Their loyalty was due partly to the returns from their ventures under his guidance, and partly to fear of his far-reaching power. But he was growing old, and there were those among them who feared he was losing his grip.

Mike felt a sudden urge to saddle his horse and be gone, to get away from all this potential cruelty, the conniving and hatred that lay dormant here, or was seething and ready to explode. He could ride out now by the Kaibab trail through the forest, skirt the mountains and find his own way through the canyon. It was a question whether he could escape, whether Ben Curry would let him go.

To run now meant to abandon all hope of seeing Dru again, and Mike knew he could not do that.

Returning to his quarters in the big stone house, he stopped in front of a mirror. With deadly, flashing speed, he began to practice quick draws of his guns. Each night he did this twenty times as swiftly as his darting hands could move.

Finally he sat down on his bed thinking. Roundy first, and today Doc Sawyer. Each seemed to be hoping he would throw up the sponge and escape this outlaw life before it was too late. Doc said it was his life, but was it?

There was a light tap on the door. Gun in hand, he reached for the latch. Roundy stepped in. He glanced at the gun.

"Gettin' scary, Mike?" he queried. "Things are happenin'!"

"I know."

Mike went on to explain what he had overheard, and Roundy's face turned serious. "Mike, did you ever hear of Dave Lenaker?"

Bastian looked up. "You mean, the Colorado gunman?"

"That's the one. He's headed this way. Ben Curry just got word that Lenaker's on his way to take over the Curry gang!"

"I thought he was one of Curry's ablest lieutenants?"

Roundy shrugged. "He was, Mike, but the word has gone out that the old man is losing his grip, and outlaws are quick to sense a thing like that. Lenaker never had any use for Perrin, and he's most likely afraid that Perrin will climb into the saddle. Dave Lenaker's a holy terror, too."

"Does Dad Curry know?" Mike said.

"Yeah. He's some wrought up, too," Roundy answered. "He was figurin' on bein' away for a few days, one of those trips he takes to Red Wall. Now, he can't go."

MORNING came cool and clear. Mike Bastian could feel disaster in the air, and he dressed hurriedly and headed for the bunkhouse. Few of the men were eating, and those few were silent. He knew they were all aware of impending change. He was finishing his coffee when Kerb Perrin came in.

Instantly, Mike was on guard. Perrin walked with a strut, and his eyes were bright and confident. He glanced at Bastian, faintly amused, and then sat down at the table and began to eat.

Roundy came in, and then Doc Sawyer. Mike dallied over his coffee, and a few minutes later was rewarded by seeing Ducrow come in with Kiefer, followed in a few minutes by "Rocky" Clatt, Monson and Panelli.

Suddenly, with the cup half to his mouth, Mike recalled with a shock that this was the group Perrin planned to use on his raid on the Ragan ranch! That could mean the raid would come off today!

He looked up to see Roundy suddenly push back his chair and leave his breakfast unfinished. The old woodsman hurried outside and vanished.

Mike put down his own cup and got up. Then he stopped, motionless. The hard muzzle of a gun was prodding him in the back, and a voice was saying, "Don't move!"

The voice was that of Fernandez, and Mike saw Perrin smiling.

"Sorry to surprise you, Bastian," Perrin said. "But with Lenaker on the road we had to move fast. By the time he gets here I'll be in the saddle. Some of the boys wanted to kill you, but I figured you'd be a good talkin' point with the Old Man. He'd be a hard kernel to dig out of that stone shell of his without you. But with you for an argument, he'll come out, all right!"

"Have you gone crazy, Perrin? You can't get away with this!"

"I am, though. You see, Rigger Molina left this morning with ten of his boys to work a little job they heard of. In fact, they are on their way to knock over the gold train."

"The gold train?" Bastian exclaimed. "Why, that was *my* job! He doesn't even know the plan made for it. Or the information I got."

Perrin smiled triumphantly. "I traded with him. I told him to give me a free hand here, and he could have the gold train. I neglected to tell him about the twelve guards riding with it, or the number with shotguns. In fact, I told him only five guards would be along. I think that will take care of Rigger for me."

Perrin turned abruptly. "Take his guns and tie his hands behind his back, then shove him out into the street. I want the Old Man to see him."

"What about him?" Kiefer demanded, pointing a gun at Doc Sawyer.

"Leave him alone. We may need a doctor, and he knows where his bread is buttered."

Confused and angry, Mike Bastian was shoved out into the warm morning sun, then jerked around to face up the canyon toward the stone house.

Suddenly, fierce triumph came over him. Perrin would have a time getting the old man out of that place. The sunlight was shining down the road from over the nouse, full into their faces. The only approach to the house was up thirty steps of stone, overlooked by an upper window of the house. From that window, and the doorway, the entire settlement could be commanded by an expert rifleman.

Ben Curry had thought of everything. The front and back doors of every building in the settlement could be commanded easily from his stronghold.

Perrin crouched behind a pile of sandbags hastily thrown up near the door of the store.

"Come on down, Curry!" he shouted. "Give yourself up or we'll kill Bastian!"

There was no answer from up the hill. Mike felt cold and sick in the stomach. Wind touched his hair and blew a

strand down over his face. He stared up at the stone house and could see no movement, hear no response.

"Come on out!" Perrin roared again. "We know you're there! Come out or we'll kill your son!"

Still no reply.

"He don't hear you," Clatt said. "Maybe he's still asleep. Let's rush the place."

"You rush it," Kiefer said. "Let me watch!"

DESPITE his helplessness, Mike felt a sudden glow of satisfaction. Old Ben Curry was a wily fighter. He knew that once he showed himself or spoke, their threat would take force. It was useless to kill Bastian unless they knew Curry was watching them.

Perrin had been so sure Curry would come out rather than sacrifice Mike, and now they were not even sure he was hearing them! Nor, Mike knew suddenly, was anybody sure Ben would come out even if they did warn him Mike would be killed.

"Come on out!" Perrin roared. "Give yourself up and we'll give you and Bastian each a horse and a half mile start! Otherwise, you both die! We've got dynamite!"

Mike chuckled. Dynamite wasn't going to do them much good. There was no way to get close to that stone house, backed up against the mountain as it was.

"Perrin," he said, "you've played the fool. Curry doesn't care whether I live or die. He won't come out of there, and there's no way you can get at him. All he's got to do is sit tight and wait until Dave Lenaker gets here. He will make a deal with Dave then, and where will you be?"

"Shut up!" Perrin bellowed. But for the first time he seemed to be aware that his plan was not working. "He'll come out, all right!"

"Let's open fire on the place," Ducrow suggested. "Or rush it like Clatt suggested!"

"Hell," Kiefer was disgusted. "Let's take what we can lay hands on and get out! There's two thousand head of cattle down in those bottoms. Rigger's gone, Lenaker ain't here yet, let's take what we can an' get out."

"Take pennies when there's millions up there in that stone house?" Perrin demanded. His face swelled in anger and the veins stood out on his forehead. "That strong room has gold in it! Stacks of money! I know it's there. With all that at hand, would you run off with a few cattle?"

Kiefer was silent but unconvinced.

Standing in the dusty street, Mike looked up at the stone house. All the loyalty and love he felt for the old man up there in that house came back with a rush. Whatever he was, good or bad, he owed to Ben Curry. Perhaps Curry had reared him for a life of crime, for outlawry, but to Ben Curry it was not a bad life. He lived like a feudal lord, and had respect for no law he did not make himself.

Wrong he might be, but he had given the man that was Mike Bastian a start. Suddenly, Mike knew that he could never have been an outlaw, that it was not in him to steal and rob and kill. But that did not mean he could be unloyal to the old man who had reared him and given him a home when he had none.

He was suddenly, fiercely proud of the old man up there alone. Like a cornered grizzly, he would fight to the death. He, Mike Bastian, might die here in the street, but he hoped old Ben Curry would stay in his stone shell and defeat them all.

Kerb Perrin was stumped. He had made his plan quickly when he'd heard Dave Lenaker was on his way here, for he knew that if Lenaker arrived it might well turn into a bloody four-cornered fight. But with Molina out of the way, he might take over from Ben Curry before Lenaker arrived, and kill Lenaker and the men he brought with him in an ambush.

He had been sure that Ben Curry would reply, that he might give himself up, or at least show himself, and Perrin had a sniper concealed to pick him off if he moved into the open. That he would get nothing but silence, he could not believe.

Mike Bastian stood alone in the center of the street. There was simply nothing he could do. At any moment Perrin might decide to have him killed where he stood. With his hands tied behind him, he was helpless. Mike wondered what had happened to Roundy? The old mountain man had risen suddenly from the table and vanished. Could he be in league with Perrin?

That was impossible. Roundy had always been Ben Curry's friend, and had never liked anything about Kerb Perrin.

"All right," Perrin said suddenly, "we'll hold Bastian. He's still a good argument. Some men will stay here, and the rest of us will make that raid on the Ragan outfit. I've an idea that when we come back, Curry will be ready to talk business."

VI

BASTIAN was led back from the street and thrown into a room in the rear of the store. There his feet were tied and he was left in darkness.

His mind was in a turmoil. If Perrin's men hit the ranch now they would take Drusilla and Juliana! He well knew how swiftly they would strike, and how helpless any ordinary ranch would be against them. And here he was tied hand and foot, helpless to do anything!

He heaved his body around and fought the ropes that bound him, until sweat streamed from his body. Even then, with his wrists torn by his struggles against the rawhide thongs that made him fast, he did not stop. There was nothing to aid him—no nail, no sharp corner, nothing at all.

The room was built of thin boards nailed to two-by-fours. He rolled himself around until he could get his back against the boards, trying to remember where the nails were. Bracing himself as best he could, he pushed his back back against the wall. He bumped against it until his back was sore. But with no effect.

Outside, all was still. Whether they had gone, he did not know. Yet if Perrin had not gone on his raid, he would be soon leaving. However, if he, Mike, could escape and find Curry's private route across the river, he might beat them to it.

He wondered where Doc Sawyer was. Perhaps he was afraid of what Perrin might do if he tried to help. Where was Roundy?

Just when he had all but given up, he had an idea—a solution, so simple that he cursed himself for not thinking of it before. Mike rolled over and got up on his knees and reached back with his bound hands for his spurs. Fortunately, he was wearing boots instead of the moccasins he wore in the woods. By wedging one spur against the other, he succeeded in holding the rowel almost immovable, and then he began to chafe the rawhide with the prongs of the rowel.

Desperately he sawed, until every muscle was crying for relief. As he stopped he heard the rattle of horses' hoofs. They were just going! Then he had a fighting chance if he could get free and get his hands on a gun!

He knew he was making headway for he could feel the notch he had already cut in the rawhide. Suddenly footsteps sounded outside. Fearful whoever was there would guess what he was doing, Mike rolled over on his side.

The door opened and Snake Fernandez came in, and in his hand he held a knife. His shoulder was bandaged crudely but tightly, and the knife was held in his left hand. He came in and closed the door.

Mike stared, horror mounting within him. Perrin was gone, and Snake Fernandez was moving toward him, smiling wickedly.

"You think you shoot Pablo Fernandez, eh?" the outlaw said, leering. "Now, we see who shoots! I am going to cut you to little pieces! I am going to cut you very slowly!"

Bastian lay on his shoulder and stared at Fernandez. There was murder in the breed's eyes, and all the Yaqui in him was coming to the fore. The man stooped over him and pricked him with the knife. Clamping his jaws, Mike held himself tense.

Rage mounted in the Yaqui. He leaned closer. "You do not jump, eh? I make you jump!"

He stabbed down hard with the knife, and Mike whipped over on his shoulder blades and kicked out wickedly with his bound feet. The movement caught the killer by surprise. Mike's feet hit him on the knees and knocked him rolling. With a lunge, Mike rolled over and jerked at the ropes that bound him.

Something snapped, and he jerked again. Like a cat the killer was on his feet now, circling warily. Desperately, Mike pulled at the ropes, turning on his shoulders to keep his feet toward

Fernandez. Suddenly, he rolled over and hurled himself at the Mexican's legs, but Fernandez jerked back and stabbed.

Mike felt a sliver of pain run along his arms, and then he rolled to his feet and jerked wildly at the thongs. His hands came loose suddenly and he hurled himself at Fernandez's legs, grabbing one ankle.

Fernandez came down hard and Bastian jerked at the leg, then scrambled to get at him. One hand grasped the man's wrist, the other his throat. With all the power that was in him, Mike shut down on both hands.

Fernandez fought like an injured wildcat, but Mike's strength was too great. Gripping the throat with his left hand, Mike slammed the Mexican's head against the floor again and again, his throttling grip freezing tighter and tighter.

The outlaw's face went dark with blood, and his struggles grew weaker. Mike let go of his throat hold suddenly and slugged him three times on the chin with his fist.

JERKING the knife from the unconscious man's hand, Mike slashed at the thongs that bound his ankles. He got to his feet shakily. Glancing down at the sprawled-out Fernandez, he hesitated. The man was not wearing a gun, but must have had one. It could be outside the door. Easing to the door, Mike opened it a crack.

The street was deserted as far as he could see. His hands felt awkward from their long constraint, and he worked his fingers to loosen them up. There was no gun in sight, so he pushed the door wider. Fernandez's gun-belts hung over the chair on the end of the porch.

He had taken two steps toward them when a man stepped out of the bunkhouse. The fellow had a toothpick lifted to his lips, but when he saw Mike Bastian he let out a yelp of surprise and went for his gun.

It was scarcely fifteen paces and Mike threw the knife under-handed, pitching it point first off the palm of his hand. It flashed in the sun as the fellow's gun came up. Then Mike could see the haft protruding from the man's middle section.

The fellow screamed and, dropping the gun, clutched at the knife hilt in in an agony of fear. His breath came in horrid gasps which Mike could hear as he grabbed Fernandez's guns and belted them on. Then he lunged for the mess hall, where his own guns had been taken from him. Shoving open the door, he sprang inside, gun in hand.

Then he froze. Doc Sawyer was standing there smiling, and Doc had a shotgun on four of Perrin's men. He looked up with relief.

"I was hoping you would escape!" he said. "I didn't want to kill these men, and didn't know how to go about tying them up by myself."

Mike caught up his own guns, removed Fernandez' gun-belts and strapped his own on. Then he shoved the outlaw's guns inside the waist band of his pants.

"Down on the floor," he ordered. "I'll tie them, and fast!"

It was the work of only a few minutes to have the four outlaws bound hand and foot. He gathered up their guns.

"Where's Roundy?" he asked.

"I haven't seen him since he left here," Doc said. "I've been wondering."

"Let's go up to the house. We'll get Ben Curry, and then we'll have things under control in a hurry."

Together, they went out the back door and walked swiftly down the line of buildings. Mike took off his hat and sailed it into the brush, knowing he could be seen from the stone house and hoping that Ben Curry would recognize him. Sawyer was excited, but trying to appear calm. He had been a gambler, and while handy with guns, was not a man accustomed to violence. Always before, he had been a bystander rather than an active participant.

Side by side, gambling against a shot from someone below, they went up the stone stairs.

There was no sound from within the house. They walked into the wide living room and glanced around. There was no sign of anyone. Then Mike saw a broken box of rifle shells.

"He's been around here!" he said. Then he looked up and shouted, "Dad!"

A muffled cry reached them, and Mike was out of the room and up another staircase. He entered the room at the top, then froze in his tracks.

Sawyer was behind him, now.

This was the fortress room, a heavy-walled stone room that had water trickling from a spring in the wall of the cliff and running down a stone trough and out through a pipe. There was food stored here, and plenty of ammunition.

The door was heavy and could be locked and barred from within. The walls of this room were all of four feet thick, and nothing short of dynamite could have blasted a way in.

This was Ben Curry's last resort, and he was here, now. But he was sprawled on the floor, his face contorted with pain.

"Broke my leg!" he panted. "Too heavy! Tried to move too . . . fast! Slipped on the steps, dragged myself up here!" He looked up at Mike. "Good for you, son! I was afraid they had killed you. You got away by yourself?"

"Yes, Dad."

Sawyer had dropped to his knees, and now he looked up.

"This is a bad break, Mike," he said. "He won't be able to move."

"Get me on a bed where I can see out of that window." Ben Curry's strength seemed to flow back with his son's presence. "I'll stand them off. You and me, Mike, we can do it!"

"Dad," Mike said, "I can't stay. I've got to go."

BEN CURRY'S face went gray with shock, then slowly the blood flowed back into it. Bastian dropped down beside him.

"Dad, I know where Perrin's going. He's gone to make a raid on the Ragan ranch. He wants the cattle and the women."

The old man lunged so mightily that Sawyer cried out and tried to push him back. Before he could speak, Mike said:

"Dad, you must tell me about the secret crossing of the Colorado that you know. I must beat them to the ranch."

Ben Curry's expression changed to one of vast relief, and then quick calculation. He nodded.

"You could do it, but it'll take tall riding!" Quickly, he outlined the route, and then added, "Now listen! At the river there's an old Navajo. He keeps some horses for me, and he has six of the finest animals ever bred. You cross that river and get a horse from him. He knows about you."

Mike got up. "Make him comfortable, Doc. Do all you can."

Sawyer stared at Mike. "What about Dave Lenaker? He'll kill us all!"

"I'll take care of Lenaker!" Curry flared. "I'm not dead by a danged sight! I'll show that renegade where he heads in. The moment he comes up that street, I'm going to kill him!" He looked at Mike again. "Son, maybe I've done wrong to raise you like I have, but if you kill Kerb Perrin or Lenaker you would be doing the West a favor. If I don't get Dave Lenaker, you may have to. So remember this: *watch his left hand!*"

Mike ran down the steps and stopped in his room to grab his .44 Winchester. It was the work of a minute to throw a saddle on a horse, and then he hit the trail. Ben Curry and Doc Sawyer could, if necessary, last for days in the fortresslike room — unless, somehow, dynamite was pitched into the window. He would have to get to the Ragan ranch, and then get back here as soon as possible.

Mike Bastian left the stable and wheeled the gray he was riding into the long winding trail through the strands of ponderosa and fir. The horse was in fine fettle and ready for the trail, and he let it out. His mind was leaping over the trail, turning each bend, trying to see how it must lay.

This was all new country to him, for he was heading southwest now into the wild, unknown region toward the great canyons of the Colorado, a region he had never traversed and, except for old Ben Curry, perhaps never crossed by any white man.

How hard the trail would be on the horse, Mike could not guess, but he knew he must ride fast and keep going. His route was the shorter, but Kerb Perrin had a lead on him, and would be hurrying to make his strike and return.

Patches of snow still hid themselves around the roots of the brush and in the hollows under the end of some giant deadfall. The air was crisp and chill, but growing warmer, and by afternoon it would be hot in the sunlight. The wind of riding whipped his black hair, and he ran the horse down a long path bedded deep with pine needles, and then turned at a blazed tree and went out across the arid top of a pleateau.

This was the strange land he loved, the fiery, heat-blasted land of the sun. Riding along the crest of a long ridge, he looked out over a long valley dotted with mesquite and sagebrush. Black dots of cattle grazing offered the only life beyond the lonely, lazy swing of a high-soaring buzzard.

He saw the white rock he had been told to look for, and turned the free-running horse into a cleft that led downward. They moved slowly here, for it was a steep slide down the side of the mesa and out on the long roll of the hill above the valley.

Time and time again Mike's hand patted his guns, as if to reassure himself they were there. His thoughts leaped ahead, trying to foresee what would happen. Would he reach the ranch first? Would he arrive only to find the buildings burned and the girls gone?

He knew only that he must get there first, that he must face them, and that at all costs he must kill Kerb Perrin and Ducrow. Without them the others might run, might not choose to fight it out. Mike had an idea that without Perrin, they would scatter to the four winds.

Swinging along the hillside, he took a trail that led again to a plateau top and ran off through the sage, heading for the smoky-blue distance of the canyon.

VII

MIKE'S mind lost track of time and distance, leaping ahead to the river and the crossing, and beyond it to Ragan's V Bar ranch. Down steep trails through the great, broken cliffs heaped high with the piled-up stone of ages. Down through the wild, weird jumble of boulders and across the flat toplands that smelled of sage and piñon, he kept the horse moving.

Then suddenly he was once more in the forests of the Kaibab. The dark pines closed around him and he rode on in the vast stillness of virgin timber, the miles falling behind, the trail growing dim before him.

Then suddenly the forest split aside and he was on the rim of the canyon—an awful blue immensity yawning before him that made him draw the gray to a halt in gasping wonder. Far out over that vast, misty blue rose islands of red sandstone, islands that were laced and crossed by bands of purple and yellow. The sunset was gleaming on the vast plateaus and buttes and peaks with a ruddy glow, fading into the opaques of the deeper canyon.

The gray was beaten and weary, now. Mike turned the horse toward a break in the plateau and rode down it, giving the animal its head. They came out upon a narrow trail that hung above a vast gorge, its bottom lost in the darkness of gathering dusk. The gray stumbled on, seeming to know its day was almost done.

Dozing in the saddle, almost two hours later, Mike Bastian felt the horse come to a halt. He jerked his head up and opened his eyes. He could feel the dampness of a deep canyon and could hear the thundering roar of the mighty river as it charged through the rock-walled slit. In front of him was a square of light.

"Halloo, the house!" he called.

He swung down as the door opened.

"Who's there?" a voice cried out.

"Mike Bastian!" he said, moving toward the house with long, swinging strides. "For Ben Curry!"

The man backed into the house. He was an ancient Navajo, but his eyes were keen and sharp.

"I want a horse," Mike said.

"You can't cross the river tonight." The Navajo spoke English well. "It is impossible!"

"There'll be a moon later," Mike answered. "When it comes up, I'm going across."

The Indian looked at him, then shrugged.

"Then eat," he said, "you'll need it."

"There are horses?"

"Horses?" The Navajo chuckled. "The best a man ever saw! Do you suppose Ben Curry would have horses here that were not the best? But they are on the other side of the stream, and safe enough. My brother is with them."

Mike slumped into a seat. "Take care of my horse, will you? I've most killed him."

When the Indian was gone, Mike slumped over on the table, burying his head in his arms. In a moment he was asleep, dreaming wild dreams of a mad race over a strange misty-blue land

with great crimson islands, riding a splendid black horse and carrying a girl in his arms. He awakened with a start. The old Indian was sitting by the fireplace, and he looked up.

"You'd better eat," he said. "The moon is rising."

They went out together walking, down the path to the water's edge. As the moon shone down into the canyon, Mike stared at the tumbling stream in consternation. Nothing living could swim in that water! It would be impossible.

"How do you cross?" he demanded. "No horse could swim that! And a boat wouldn't get fifty feet before it would be dashed to pieces!"

The Indian chuckled. "That isn't the way we cross it. You are right in saying no boat could cross here, for there is no landing over there, and the canyon is so narrow that the water piles up back of the narrows and comes down with a great rush."

Mike looked at him again. "You talk like an educated man," he said. "I don't understand."

The Navajo shrugged. "I was for ten years with a missionary, and after traveling with him as an interpreter he took me back to the States, where I stayed with him for two years. Then I lived in Sante Fe."

HE WAS leading the way up a steep path that skirted the cliff but was wide enough to walk comfortably. Opposite them, the rock wall of the canyon lifted and the waters of the tumbling river roared down through the narrow chasm.

"Ben Curry does things well, as you shall see," the guide said. "It took him two years of effort to get this bridge built."

Mike stared. "Across there?"

"Yes. A bridge for a man with courage. It is a rope bridge, made fast to iron rings sunk in the rock."

Mike Bastian halted on the rocky ledge at the end of the trail and looked out across the gorge. In the pale moonlight he could see two slim threads trailing across the canyon high above the tumbling water. Just two ropes, and one of them four feet above the other.

"You mean," he said, "that Ben Curry crossed on *that*?"

"He did. I have seen him cross that bridge a dozen times, at least."

"Have you crossed it?"

The Navajo shrugged. "Why should I? The other side is the same as this, is it not? There is nothing over there that I want."

Mike looked at the slender strands, and then he took hold of the upper rope and tentatively put a foot on the lower one. Slowly, carefully, he eased out above the raging waters. One slip and he would be gone, for no man could hope to live in those angry flood waters. He slid his foot along, then the other, advancing his handholds as he moved. Little by little, he worked his way across the canyon.

He was trembling when he got his feet in the rocky cavern on the opposite side, and so relieved to be safely across that he scarcely was aware of the old Indian who sat there awaiting him.

The Navajo got up, and without a word started down the trail. He quickly led Mike to a cabin built in the opening of a dry, branch canyon, and tethered before the door of the cabin was a huge bay stallion.

Waving at the Indian, Mike swung into the saddle and the bay turned, taking to the trail as if eager to be off.

Would Perrin travel at night? Mike doubted it. but it was possible, so he kept moving himself. The trail led steadily upward, winding finally out of the canyon to the plateau.

The bay stallion seemed to know the trail; it was probable that Curry had used this horse himself. It was a splendid animal, big and very fast. Letting the horse have his head, Mike felt the animal gather his legs under him. Then he broke into a long, swinging lope that literally ate up the space. How long the horse could hold the speed he did not know, but it was a good start.

It was at least a ten-hour ride to the Ragan V-Bar ranch.

The country was rugged and wild. Several times startled deer broke and ran before him, and there were many rabbits. Dawn was breaking faintly in the east now, and shortly after daybreak he stopped near a pool of melted snow water and made coffee. Then he remounted the rested stallion and raced on.

DRUSILLA RAGAN brushed her hair thoughtfully, and then pinned it up. Outside, she could hear her mother moving about, and the Mexican girls who helped around the house whenever they were visiting. Julie was up, she knew, and had been up for hours. She was outside talking to that blond cowhand from New Mexico, the one Voyle Ragan had hired to break horses.

Suddenly she heard Julie's footsteps, and then the door opened.

"Aren't you ready yet?" Julie asked. "I'm famished!"

"I'll be along in a minute." Then as Julie turned to go. "What did you think of him, Julie? That cowboy who got the buckboard for us? Wasn't he the handsomest thing?"

"Oh, you mean that Mike Bastian?" Julie said. "I was wondering why you were mooning around in here. Usually you're the first one up. Yes, I expect he is good looking. But did you see the way he looked when you mentioned Uncle Voyle? He acted so strange!"

"I wonder if Uncle Voyle knows anything about him? Let's ask!"

"You ask," Julie replied, laughing. "He's *your* problem!"

Voyle Ragan was a tall man, but lean and without Ben Curry's weight. He was already seated at the table when they came in, and Dru was no sooner in her seat than she put her question. Voyle's face became a mask.

"Mike Bastian?" he said thoughtfully. "I don't know. Where'd you meet him?"

The girls explained, and he nodded.

"In Weaver?" Voyle Ragan knew about the gold train, and his eyes narrowed. "I think I know who he is, but I never saw him that I heard of. You probably won't see him again, because most of those riders from up in the Strip stay there most of the time. They are a wild bunch."

"On the way down here," Julie said, "the man who drove was telling us that outlaws live up there."

"Could be. It's wild enough." Voyle Ragan lifted his head, listening. For a moment he had believed he heard horses. But it was too soon for Ben to be coming. If anyone else came, he would have to get rid of them, and quickly.

He heard it again, and then saw the cavalcade of horsemen riding into the yard. Voyle came to his feet abruptly.

"Stay here!" he snapped.

His immediate thought was of a posse, and then he saw Kerb Perrin. He had seen Perrin many times, although Perrin had never met him. Slowly, he moved up to the door, uncertain of his course. These were Ben's men, but Ben had always told him that none of them was aware that he owned this ranch or that Voyle was his brother.

"Howdy!" Voyle said. "What can I do for you?"

Kerb Perrin swung down from his horse. Behind him Monson, Ducrow and Kiefer were getting down.

"You can make as little trouble as you know how," Perrin said, his eyes gleaming. "All you got to do is stay out of the way. Where's the girls? We want them, and we want your cattle."

"What is this?" Voyle demanded. He wasn't wearing a gun; it was hanging from a clothes-tree in the next room. "You men can't get away with anything here!"

Perrin's face was ugly as he strode toward the door. "That's what *you* think!" he sneered.

The tall old man blocked his way, and Perrin shoved him aside. Perrin had seen the startled faces of the girls inside and knew the men behind him were spreading out.

Ragan swung suddenly and his fist struck Perrin in the mouth. The gunman staggered, his face went white with fury.

A Mexican started from the corral toward the house and Ducrow wheeled, firing from the hip. The man cried out and sprawled over on the hard-packed earth, moaning out his agony.

Perrin had drawn back slowly, his face ugly with rage, a slow trickling of blood from his lips. "For that, I'll kill you!" he snarled at Ragan.

"Not yet, Perrin!"

The voice had a cold ring of challenge, and Kerb Perrin went numb with shock. He turned slowly, to see Mike Bastian standing at the corner of the corral.

VIII

KERB PERRIN was profoundly shocked. He had left Bastian a prisoner at Toadstool Canyon. Since he was free now, it could mean that Ben

Curry was back in the saddle. It could mean a lot of things. An idea came with startling clarity to him. He had to kill Mike Bastian, and kill him now!

"You men have made fools of yourselves!" Bastian's voice was harsh. He stood there in his gray buckskins, his feet a little apart, his black hair rippled by the wind. "Ben Curry's not through! And this place is under his protection. He sent me to stop you, and stop you I shall! Now, any of you who don't want to fight Ben Curry, get out while the getting is good!"

"Stay where you are!" Perrin snapped. "I'll settle with you, Bastian— Right now!"

His hand darted down in the sweeping, lightning-fast draw for which he was noted. His lips curled in sneering contempt. Yet, as his gun lifted, he saw flame blossom from a gun in Bastian's hand and a hard object slugged him. Perplexed and disturbed, he took a step backward. Whatever had hit him had knocked his gun out of line. He turned it toward Bastian again. The gun in Mike's hand blasted a second time, and a third.

Perrin could not seem to get his own gun leveled. His mind wouldn't function right, and he felt a strangeness in the stomach. His legs— Suddenly he was on his knees. He tried to get up and saw a dark pool forming near his knees. He must have slipped, he must have— That was blood.

It was *his* blood!

From far off he heard shouts, then a scream, then the pound of horses' hoofs. Then the thunder of those hoofs seemed to sweep through his brain and he was lying face down in the dirt. And then he knew: Mike Bastian had beaten him to the draw. Mike Bastian had shot him three times. Mike Bastian had killed him!

He started to scream a protest—and then he just laid there on his face, his cheek against the bloody ground, his mouth half open.

Kerb Perrin was dead.

In the instant that Perrin had reached for his gun, Ducrow suddenly cut and ran toward the corner of the house. Kiefer, seeing his leader gunned down then, made a wild grab for his own weapon. The old man in the doorway killed him with a hastily caught-up rifle.

The others broke for their horses. Mike rushed after them and got off one more shot as they raced out of the yard. It was then he heard the scream, and whirled.

Ducrow had acted with suddenness. He had come to the ranch for women, and women he intended to have. Even as Bastian was killing Perrin, he had rushed for the house. Darting around the corner where two saddle horses were waiting, he was just in time to see Juliana, horrified at the killing, run back into her bedroom. The bedroom window opened beside Ducrow, and the outlaw reached through and grabbed her.

Julie went numb with horror. Ducrow threw her across Perrin's saddle, and with a piggin string, which he always carried from his days as a cowhand, he jerked her ankles together under the horse's belly.

Instantly, he was astride the other horse. Julie screamed, then. Wheeling, he struck her across the mouth with a backhand blow. He caught up the bridle of her horse, drove in spurs to his own mount, and they went out of the ranch yard at a dead run.

MIKE hesitated only an instant when he heard Julie scream, then ran for the corner of the house. By the time he rounded the corner, gun in hand, the two horses were streaking into the piñons. In the dust, he could only catch a glimpse of the riders. He turned and walked back.

That had been a woman's scream, but Dru was in the doorway and he had seen her. Only then did he recall Julie. He sprinted for the doorway.

"Where's Julie?" he shouted to Drusilla. "Look through the house!"

He glanced around quickly. Kerb Perrin, mouth agape, lay dead on the hard earth of the ranch yard. Kiefer lay near the body of the Mexican Ducrow had killed. The whole raid had been a matter of no more than two or three minutes.

Voyle Ragan dashed from the house. "Julie's gone!" he yelled hoarsely. "I'll get a horse!"

Bastian caught his arm. His own dark face was tense and his eyes wide.

"You'll stay here!" he said harshly. "Take care of the women and the ranch. I'll go after Julie."

Dru ran from the house. "She's gone, Mike, she's gone! They have her!"

Mike walked rapidly to his horse, thumbing shells into his gun. Dru Ragan started to mount another horse.

"You go back to the house!" he ordered.

Dru's chin came up. In that moment she reminded him of Ben Curry.

"She's my sister!" Dru cried. "When we find her, she may need a woman's care!"

"All right," Mike said, "but you'll have to do some riding!"

He wheeled the big bay around. The horse Dru had mounted was one of Ben Curry's beautiful horses, bred not only for speed but for staying power.

Mike's mind leaped ahead. Would Ducrow get back with the rest of them? Would he join Monson and Clatt? If he did, it was going to be a problem. Ducrow was a handy man with a six-gun, but the three of them, or more if they were all together, would be nothing less than suicide.

He held the bay horse's pace down. He had taken a swift glance at the hoofmarks of the horses he was trailing, and knew them both.

Would Ducrow head back for Toadstool Canyon? Bastian considered that as he rode, and decided he would not. Ducrow did not know that Julie was Ben Curry's daughter. But from what Mike had said, Ducrow had cause to believe that Ben was back in the saddle again. And men who went off on rebel raids were not lightly handled by Curry. Besides, he would want, if possible, to keep the girl for himself.

Mike had been taught by Roundy that there was more to trailing a man than following his tracks, for you trailed him down the devious paths of the mind as well. He tried to put himself in Ducrow's place.

The man could not have much food, yet on his many outlaw forays he must have learned the country and would know where there was water. Also, there were many ranch hangouts of the outlaws that Ducrow would know. He would probably go to one of them. Remembering the maps that Ben Curry had shown him and made him study, Mike knew the locations of all those places.

The trail turned suddenly off through the chaparral, and Mike turned to follow. Drusilla had said nothing since they started. Once he glanced at her. Even now, with her face dusty and tear-streaked, she was lovely. Her eyes were fastened on the trail, and he noted with a little thrill of satisfaction that she had brought her rifle along.

Dru certainly was her father's daughter, and the fit companion for any man.

BASTIAN turned his attention to the trail. Despite the small lead he had, Ducrow had vanished. That taught Mike something of the nature of the man he was tracing; his years of outlawry had taught him how to disappear when need be. The method was simple. Turning off into the thicker desert growth, he had ridden down into a sandy wash.

Here, due to the deep sand and the tracks of horses and cattle, it was a problem and it took Mike several minutes to decide whether Ducrow had gone up or down the wash. Then he caught a hoofprint, and they were off, winding up the sandy wash. Yet Mike knew they would not be in that sand for long. Ducrow would wish to save his horses' strength.

True enough, the trail soon turned out. From then on, it was a nightmare. Ducrow ran off in a straightaway, then turned at right angles, weaved about in the sandy desert. Several times he had stopped to brush out portions of his trail, but Roundy had not spent years of training in vain and Mike Bastian hung to the trail like a bloodhound.

Dru, riding behind him, saw him get off and walk, saw him pick up sign where she could see nothing.

Hours passed and the day slowly drew toward an end. Dru, her face pale, realized night would come before they found her sister. She was about to speak, when Mike looked up at her.

"You wanted to come," he said, "so you'll have to take the consequences. I'm not stopping because of darkness."

"How can you trail them?"

"I can't," he shrugged. "But I think I know where they are going. We'll take a chance."

Darkness closed around them. Mike's shirt stuck to his body with sweat, and a chill wind of the higher plateaus

blew down through the trees. He rode on, his face grim and his body weary with long hours in the saddle. The big bay kept on, seemingly unhurt by the long hours of riding. Time and again he patted the big horse, and Dru could hear him talking to it in a low voice. Suddenly at the edge of a clearing, he reined in.

"Dru," he said, "there's a ranch ahead. It's an outlaw hangout. There may be one or more men there. Ducrow may be there. I am going up to find out."

"I'll come too," the girl said impulsively.

"You'll stay here!" His voice was flat. "When I whistle, then you come. Bring my horse along."

He swung down and, slipping off his boots, pulled on his moccasins. Then he went forward into the darkness. Alone, she watched him vanish toward the dark bulk of the buildings. Suddenly a light came on—too soon for him to have arrived.

Mike weaved his way through sage and mesquite to the corral, and worked his way along the bars. Horses were there but it was too dark to make them out. One of them stood near, and he put his hand through the bars, touching the horse's flank. It was damp with sweat.

His face tightened.

The horse stepped away, snorting. As if waiting for just that sound, a light went on in the house: a lamp had been lighted. By that time Mike was at the side of the house, flattened against the wall, peering in.

He saw a heavy, square-faced man with a pistol in his hand. The man put the gun under a towel on the table, then began pacing around the room, waiting. Mike smiled grimly, walked around the house and stepped up on the porch. In his moccasins, he made no sound. He opened the door suddenly and stepped into the room.

IX

OBVIOUSLY the man had been waiting for the sound of boots, of horses, or the jingle of spurs. Even a knock. Mike Bastian's sudden appearance startled him, and he straightened up from the table, his hand near the towel that covered the gun.

Bastian closed the door behind him. The man stared at the black-haired young man who faced him, stared with puckered brow. This man didn't look like a sheriff to him. Not those tied-down guns, or that gray buckskin stained with travel, and no hat.

"You're Walt Sutton," Mike snapped. "Get your hands off that table before I blow you wide open! Get 'em off!"

He jammed the muzzle of the gun into Sutton's stomach with such force that it doubled the man up.

Then he swept the towel from the gun.

"You fool!" he said sharply. "If you'd tried that, I'd have killed you!"

Sutton staggered back, his face gray. He had never even seen Mike's hand move.

"Who are you?" he gasped, struggling to get his wind back.

"I'm Mike Bastian, Ben Curry's foster son. He owns this ranch. He set you up here, gave you stock to get started with, now you double-cross

[*Turn page*]

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him! Where's Ducrow?"

Sutton swallowed. "I ain't seen him!" he protested.

"You're a liar, Sutton! His horses are out in that corral. I could pistol-whip you, but I'm not going to. You're going to tell me where he is, and now, or I'm going to start shooting!"

Walt Sutton was unhappy. He knew Ducrow as one of Ben Curry's men who had come here before for fresh horses. He had never seen this man who called himself Mike Bastian, yet so far as he knew, no one but Curry himself had ever known the true facts about his ranch. If this man was lying, how could he know?

"Listen, mister," he protested, "I don't want no trouble—least of all with old Ben. He did set me up here. Sure, I seen Ducrow, but he told me the law was after him."

"Do I look like the law?" Mike snapped. "He's kidnaped the daughter of a friend of Curry's, niece of Voyle Ragan. I've got to find him."

"Kidnaped Voyle's niece? Gosh, mister, I wondered why he wanted two saddle horses!"

Mike whistled sharply. "Where'd he go?" he demanded then.

"Darned if I know," Sutton answered. "He come in here maybe an hour ago, wanted two saddle horses and a pack horse loaded with grub. He took two canteens, then, and lit out."

Drusilla appeared now in the doorway, and Walt Sutton's eyes went to her.

" I know you," he said. "You're one of Voyle Ragan's nieces."

"She is," Mike said. "Ducrow kidnaped the other one. I'm going to find him. Get us some grub, but fast!"

Mike paced restlessly while Sutton filled a pack and strapped it behind the saddle of one of the fresh horses he furnished them. The horses were some of those left at the ranch by Ben Curry's orders, and were good.

"No pack horses," Mike had said. "We're travelling fast."

Now, he turned to Sutton again. "You got any idea where Ducrow might be going?"

"Well" — Sutton licked his lips — "he'd kill me if he knowed I said anything, but he did say something about Peach Meadow Canyon."

"Peach Meadow?" Bastian stared at Sutton. The canyon was almost a legend in the Coconino country. "What did he ask you?"

"If I knowed the trail in there, an' if it was passable."

"What did you say?"

Sutton shrugged. "Well, I've heard tell of that there canyon ever since I been in this country, an' ain't seen no part of it. I've looked, all right. Who wouldn't look, if all they say is true?"

When they were about to mount their horses, Mike turned to the girl and put his hand on her arm.

"Dru," he said, "it's going to be rough, so if you want to go back, say so."

"I wouldn't think of it!" she said firmly.

"Well, I won't say I'm sorry, because I'm not. I'll sure like having you beside me. In fact"—he hesitated, then went on—"it will be nice having you."

THAT was not what he had started to say, and Dru knew it. She looked at Mike for a moment, her eyes soft. He was tired now, and she could see how drawn his face was. She knew only a little of the ride he had made to reach them before Perrin's outlaws came.

When they were in the saddle, Mike explained a little of what he had in mind. "I doubt Ducrow will stop for anything now," he said. "There isn't a good hiding place within miles, so he'll head right for the canyon country. He may actually know something about Peach Meadow Canyon. If he does, he knows a perfect hideaway. Outlaws often stumble across places in their getaways that a man couldn't find if he looked for it in years."

"What is Peach Meadow Canyon?" Dru asked.

"It's supposed to be over near the river in one of the deep canyons that branch off from the Colorado. According to the story, a fellow found the place years ago, but the Spanish had been there before him, and the Indians before them. There are said to be old Indian ruins in the place, but no way to get into it from the plateau. The Indians found a way through some caves in the Coconino sandstone, and the Spanish are supposed to have reached it by boat.

"Anyway," he continued, "this prospector who found it said the climate was tropical, or almost. That it was in a branch canyon, that there was fresh water and a nice meadow. Somebody had planted some fruit trees, and when he went back he took a lot of peach pits and was supposed to have planted an orchard.

"Nobody ever saw him or it again," Mike went on, "so the place exists only on his say-so. The Indians alive now swear they never heard of it. Ducrow might be trying to throw us off, or he might honestly know something."

For several miles the trail was a simple thing. They were riding down the floor of a high-walled canyon from which there was no escape. Nevertheless, from time to time Bastian stopped and examined the sandy floor with matches. Always the tracks were there, and going straight down the canyon.

This was new country to Mike. He knew the altitude was gradually lessening, and believed they would soon emerge on the desert plateau that ran toward the canyon and finally lost itself on the edge of the pine forest.

When they had traveled about seven miles, the canyon ended abruptly and they emerged in a long valley. Mike reined in and swung down.

"Like it or not," he said, "here's where we stop. We can't have a fire, because from here it could be seen for miles. We don't want Ducrow to believe we stopped."

Mike spread his poncho on the sand and handed Dru a blanket. She was feeling the chill and gathered it close around her.

"Aren't you cold?" she said suddenly. "If we sat close together, we could share the blanket."

He hesitated, then sat down alongside her and pulled the blanket across his shoulders, grateful for the warmth. Leaning back against the rock, warmed by proximity and the blanket, they dozed a little.

Mike had loosened the girths and ground-hitched the horses. He wasn't worried about them straying off.

When the sky was just faintly gray, he opened his eyes. Dru's head was on his shoulder and she was sleeping. He could feel the rise and fall of her breathing against his body. He glanced down at her face, amazed that this could happen to him—that he, Mike Bastian, foster son of an outlaw, could be sitting alone in the desert with this girl sleeping on his shoulder!

Some movement of his must have awakened her, for her breath caught, and then she looked up. He could see the sleepy smile in her eyes and on her mouth.

"I was tired!" She whispered the words, and made no effort to move her head from his shoulder. "You've nice shoulders," she said. "If we were riding anywhere else, I'd not want to move at all."

"Nor I." He glanced at the stars. "We'd better get up. I think we can chance a very small fire and a quick cup of coffee."

While he was breaking dried mesquite and greasewood, Dru got the pack open and dug out the coffee and some bread. There was no time for anything else.

The fire made but little light, shielded by the rocks and kept very small, and there was less glow now due to the grayness of the sky. They ate quickly.

WHEN they were in the saddle again, he turned down the trail left by the two saddle horses and the pack horse he was following. Sign was dim, but could be followed without dismounting. Dawn broke, and the sky turned red and gold, then blue. The sun lifted and began to take some of the chill from their muscles.

The trail crossed the valley, skirting an alkali lake, and then dipped into the rocky wilderness that preceded the pine forest. He could find no signs of a camp. Julie, who lacked the fire and also the strength of Dru, must be almost dead with weariness, for Ducrow was not stopping. Certainly, the man had more than a possible destination before him. In fact, the farther they rode, the more confident Mike was that the outlaw knew exactly where he was headed.

The pines closed around them and the trail became more difficult to follow. It was slow going, and much of it Mike Bastian walked. Suddenly he stopped, scowling.

The trail, faint as it had been, had vanished into thin air!

"Stay where you are," he told Dru.

"I've got to look around a bit."

Mike studied the ground carefully. Then he walked back to the last tracks he had seen. Their own tracks did not cover them, as he had avoided riding over them in case he needed to examine the hoofprints once more.

Slowly, Mike paced back and forth over the pine needles. Then he stopped and studied the surrounding timber very carefully. It seemed to be absolutely uniform in appearance. Avoiding the trail ahead, he left the girl and circled into the woods, describing a slow circle around the horses.

There were no tracks.

He stopped, his brow furrowed. It was impossible to lose them after following so far—yet they were gone, and they had left no trail. He walked back to the horses again, and Dru stared at him, her eyes wide.

"Wait a minute," he said as she began to speak. "I want to think."

He studied, inch by inch, the woods on his left, the trail ahead, and then the trail on his right. Nothing offered a clue. The tracks of three horses had simply vanished as though the animals and their riders had been swallowed into space.

On the left the pines stood thick, and back inside the woods the brush was so dense as to allow no means of passing through it. That was out, then. He had studied that brush and had walked through those woods, and if a horseman did turn that way there would be no place to go.

The trail ahead was trackless, so it had to be on the right. Mike turned and walked again to the woods on his right. He inched over the ground, yet there was nothing, no track, no indication that anything heavier than a rabbit had passed that way. It was impossible, yet it had happened.

"Could they have backtracked?" Dru asked suddenly. "Over their same trail?"

Mike shook his head. "There were no tracks," he said, "but those going ahead, I think—" He stopped dead still, then swore. "I'm a fool! A darned fool!" He grinned at her. "Lend me your hat."

Puzzled, she removed her sombrero and handed it to him. He turned and using the hat for a fan, began to wave it over the ground to let the wind disturb the surface needles. Patiently, he worked over the area around the last tracks seen, and then to the woods on both sides of the trail. Suddenly, he stopped.

"Got it!" he said. "Here they are!"

Dru ran to him. He pointed to a track, then several more.

"Ducrow was smart," Mike explained. "He turned at right angles and rode across the open space, and then turned back down the way he had come, riding over on the far side. Then he dismounted and, coming back, gathered pine needles from somewhere back in the brush and came along here, pressing the earth down and scattering the needles to make it seem there had been no tracks at all!"

Mounting again, they started back, and from time to time he dismounted to examine the trail. Suddenly the tracks ended and turned off into thick woods. Leading their horses, they followed.

"Move quietly as you can," Mike said softly. "We may be close, now. Or he may wait and try to ambush us."

"You think he knows we're following him?" Dru asked.

"Sure! And he knows I'm a tracker. He'll use every trick in the books, now."

For awhile, the trail was not difficult to follow and they rode again. Mike Bastian could not take his mind from the girl who rode with him. What would she think when she discovered her father was an outlaw? That he was the mysterious leader of the outlaws?

X

PINE trees thinned out, and before them was the vast blue and misty distance of the canyon. Mike slide to the ground and walked slowly forward on moccasined feet. There were a few scattered pines and the cracked and splintered rim of the canyon, breaking sharply off to fall away into the vast depths. Carefully, he scouted the edge of the canyon, and when he saw the trail he stopped flat-footed and stared, his heart in his mouth.

Had they gone down *there?* He knelt on the rock. Yes, there was the scar of a horse's hoof. He walked out a little farther, looking down.

The cliff fell away for hundreds of feet without even a hump in the wall, then just a little farther along was the trail. It was a rocky ledge scarcely three feet wide that ran steeply down the side of the rock from the canyon's rim. On the left the wall, on the right the vast, astonishing emptiness of the canyon.

Thoughtfully, he walked back and explained.

"All right, Mike," Dru nodded. "If you're ready, I am."

He hesitated to bring the horses, but decided it would be the best thing. He drew his rifle from the saddle scabbard and jacked a shell into the chamber.

Dru looked at him, steady-eyed. "Mike, maybe he'll be waiting for us," she said. "We may get shot. Especially you."

Bastian nodded. "That could be," he agreed.

She came toward him. "Mike, who are you, what are you? Uncle Voyle seemed to know you, or about you, and that outlaw, Perrin. He knew you. Then I heard you say Ben Curry had sent you to stop them from raiding the ranch. Are you an outlaw, Mike?"

For as long as a man might have counted a slow ten, Mike stared out over the canyon, trying to make up his mind. Now, at this stage, there was only one thing he could say.

"No, Dru, not exactly, but I was raised by an outlaw," he explained. "Ben Curry brought me up like his own son, with the idea that I would take over the gang when he stepped out."

"You lived with them in their hideout?"

"When I wasn't out in the woods." He nodded. "Ben Curry had me taught everything—how to shoot, to track, to ride, even to open safes and locks."

"What's he like, this Ben Curry?" Dru asked.

"He's quite a man!" Mike Bastian said, smiling. "When he started outlawing, everybody was rustling a few cows, and he just went a step further and robbed banks and stages, or planned the robberies and directed them. I don't expect he really figured himself bad. He might have done a lot of other things, for he has brains. But he killed a man—and then in getting away, he killed another. The first one was justified. The second one— Well, he was in a hurry."

"Are you apologizing for him?" Dru said quickly. "After all, he was an outlaw and a killer."

He glanced at her. "He was, yes. And I am not making any apologies for him, nor would he want them. He's a man who always stood on his own two feet. Maybe he was wrong, but there were the circumstances. And he was mighty good to me. I didn't have a home, no place to go, and he took me in and treated me right."

"Was he a big man, Mike? A big old man?"

He did not look her way. She knew, then?

"In many ways," he said, "he is one of the biggest men I know. We'd better get started."

IT WAS like stepping off into space, yet the horses took it calmly enough. They were mountain bred and would go anywhere as long as they could get a foothold on something.

The red maw of the canyon gaped to receive them and they went down, following the narrow, switchback trail that seemed to be leading them into the very center of the earth.

It was late afternoon before they started down, and now the shadows began to creep up the canyon walls, reaching with ghostly fingers for the vanished sunlight. Overhead the red blazed with the setting sun's reflection and seemed to be hurling arrows of flame back into the sky. The depths of the canyon seemed chill after the sun on the plateau, and Mike walked warily, always a little ahead of the horse he was leading.

Dru was riding, and when he glanced back once, she smiled brightly at him, keeping her eyes averted from the awful depths below.

Mike had no flair for making love, for his knowledge of women was slight. He wished now that he knew more of their ways, knew the things to say that would appeal to a girl.

A long time later they reached the bottom, and far away on their right they could hear the river rushing through the canyon. Mike knelt, and striking a match, he studied the trail. The tracks turned back into a long canyon that led back from the river.

He got into the saddle then, his rifle across his saddle, and rode forward.

At the end, it was simple. The long chase had led to a quiet meadow, and he could smell the grass before he reached it, could hear the babble of a small stream. The canyon walls flared wide and he saw, not far away, the faint sparkle of a fire.

Dru came alongside him. "Is . . . that them?" she asked, low-voiced.

"It couldn't be anyone else." Her hand was on his arm and he put his own hand over it. "I've got to go up there alone, Dru. I'll have to kill him, you know."

"Yes," she said, simply, "but don't *you* be killed!"

He started to ride forward and she caught his arm.

"Mike, why have you done all this?" she asked. "She isn't your sister."

"No." He looked very serious in the vague light. "She's yours."

He turned his head and spoke to the horse. The animal started forward.

When, shortly, he stopped the mount, he heard a sound nearby. Dru Ragan was close behind him.

"Dru," he whispered, "you've *got* to stay back! Hold my horse. I'm going up on foot."

He left her like that and walked steadily forward. Even before he got to the fire, he could see them. The girl, her head slumped over on her arms, half dead with weariness, and Ducrow bending over the fire. From time to time Ducrow glanced at the girl. Finally, he reached over and cuffed her on the head.

"Come on, get some of this coffee into you!" he growled. "This is where we stay—in Peach Meadow Canyon. Might as well give up seein' that sister of yours, because you're my woman, now!" He sneered. "Monson and them, they ran like scared foxes! No bottom to them. I come for a woman, and I got one!"

"Why don't you let me go?" Juliana protested. "My father will pay you well. He has lots of money."

"Your pa?" Ducrow stared at her. "I thought Voyle Ragan was your uncle?"

"He is. I mean Ben Ragan. He ranches up north of the canyon."

"North of the canyon?" Ducrow laughed. "Not unless he's a Mormon, he don't. What's he look like, this pa of yours?"

"He's a great big man, with iron-gray hair, a heavy jaw—" She stopped, staring at Ducrow. "What's the matter with you?"

Ducrow got slowly to his feet. "Your pa—Ben Ragan? A big man with gray hair, an' maybe a scar on his jaw—that him?"

"Oh, yes! Take me to him! He'll pay you well!"

Suddenly, Ducrow let out a guffaw of laughter. He slapped his leg and bellowed. "Man, oh, man! Is that a good one! You're Ben Curry's daughter! Why, that old—" He sobered. "What did you call him? Ragan? Why, honey, that old man of yours is the biggest outlaw in the world! Or was until today! Well, of all the—"

"You've laughed enough, Ducrow!"

AS MIKE BASTIAN spoke, he stepped to the edge of the firelight. "You leave a tough trail, but I followed it."

Ducrow turned, half crouching, his cruel eyes glaring at Bastian.

"Roundy was right," he snarled. "You could track a snake across a flat rock! Well, now that you're here, what are you goin' to do?"

"That depends on you, Ducrow. You can drop your gun and I'll take you in for a trial. Or you can shoot it out."

"Drop my guns?" Ducrow chuckled. "You'd actually take me in, too! You're too soft, Bastian. You'd never make the boss man old Ben Curry was. He would never even of said I, yes, or no, he would have seen me and gone to blastin'! You got a sight to learn, youngster. Too bad you ain't goin' to live long enough to learn it."

Ducrow lifted one hand carelessly and wiped it across the tobacco-stained stubble of his beard. His right hand swept down for his gun even as his left touched his face. His gun came up, spouting flame.

Mike Bastian palmed his gun and momentarily held it rigid, then he fired.

Ducrow winced like he had been slugged in the chest, and then he lifted on his tiptoes. His gun came level again.

"You're . . . fast!" he gasped. "Devilish fast!"

He fired, and then Mike triggered his gun once more. The second shot spun Ducrow around and he fell, face down, at the edge of the fire.

Dru came running, her rifle in her hand, but when she saw Mike still standing, she dropped the rifle and ran to him.

"Oh, Mike!" she sobbed. "I was so frightened! I thought you were killed!"

Julie started to rise, then fell headlong in a faint. Dru rushed to her side.

Mike Bastian absently thumbed shells into his gun and stared down at the fallen man. He had killed a third man. Suddenly, and profoundly, he wished with all his heart he would never have to kill another.

He holstered his weapon, and gathering up the dead man, carried him away from the fire. He would bury him here, in Peach Meadow Canyon.

XI

SUNLIGHT lay upon the empty street of the settlement in Toadstool Canyon when Mike Bastian, his rifle crosswise on his saddle, rode slowly into the lower end of the town.

Beside him, sitting straight in her saddle, rode Dru Ragan. Julie had stayed at the ranch, but Dru had flatly refused. Ben Curry was her father, and she was going to him, outlaw camp or not.

If Dave Lenaker had arrived Mike thought, he was quiet enough, for there was no sound. No horses stood at the hitch-rails, and the door of the saloon stood wide open.

Something fluttered on the ground and Mike looked at it quickly. It was a torn bit of cloth on a man's body. The man was a stranger. Dru noticed it, and her face paled.

His rifle at ready, Mike rode on, eyes shifting from side to side. A man's wrist lay in sight across a window sill, his pistol on the porch outside. There was blood on the stoop of another house.

"There's been a fight," Mike said, "and a bad one. You'd better get set for the worst."

Dru said nothing, but her mouth held firm. At the last building, the mess hall, a man lay dead in a doorway. They rode on, then drew up at the foot of the stone steps and dismounted. Mike shoved his rifle back in the saddle scabbard and loosened his six-guns.

"Let's go!" he said.

The wide veranda was empty and still, but when he stepped into the huge living room, he stopped in amazement, five men sat about a table playing cards.

Ben Curry's head came up and he waved at them.

"Come on in, Mike!" he called. "Who's that with you? Dru, by all that's holy!"

Doc Sawyer, Roundy, Garlin and Colley were there. Garlin's head was bandaged, and Colley had one foot stretched out stiff and straight, as did Ben Curry. But all were smiling.

Dru ran to her father and fell on her knees beside him.

"Oh, Dad!" she cried. "We were so scared!"

"What happened here?" Mike demanded. "Don't sit there grinning! Did Dave Lenaker come?"

"He sure did, and what do you think?" Doc said. "It was Rigger Molina got him! Rigger got to Weaver and found out Perrin had double-crossed him before he ever pulled the job. He discovered that Perrin had lied about the guards, so he rushed back. When he found out that Ben was crippled, and that Kerb Perrin had run out, he waited for Lenaker himself.

"He was wonderful, Mike," Doc continued. "I never saw anything like it! He paced the veranda out there like a bear in a cage, swearing and waiting for Lenaker. Muttered, 'Leave you in the lurch, will they? I'll show 'em! Lenaker thinks he can gun you down because you're gettin' old, does he? Well, killer I may be, but I can kill him!' And he did, Mike. They shot it out in the street down there. Dave Lenaker, as slim and tall as you, and that great bear of a Molina.

"Lenaker beat him to the draw," Doc went on. "He got two bullets into the Rigger, but Molina wouldn't go down. He stood there spraddle-legged in the street and shot until both guns were empty. Lenaker kept shooting, and must have hit Molina five times, but when he went down, Rigger walked over to him and spat in his face. 'That for double-crossers!' he said. He was magnificent!"

"They fooled me, Mike," Roundy

said. "I seen trouble a-comin' an' figured I'd better get to old Ben. I never figured they'd slip in behind you, like they done. Then the news of Lenaker comin' got me. I knowed him an' was afraid of him, so I figured to save Ben Curry I'd get down the road and dry-gulch him. Never killed a white man in my life, Mike, but I was sure aimin' to! But he got by me on another trail. After Molina killed Lenaker, his boys and some of them from here started after the gold they'd figured was in this house."

"Doc here," Garlin said, "is some fighter! I didn't know he had it in him."

"Roundy, Doc, Garlin an' me," Colley said, "we sided Ben Curry. It was a swell scrap while it lasted. Garlin got one through his scalp, and I got two bullets in the leg. Aside from that, we came out all right."

BRIEFLY, then, Mike explained all that had transpired, how he had killed Perrin, and then had trailed Ducrow to Peach Meadow Canyon and the fight there.

"Where's the gang?" he demanded now. "All gone?"

"All the live ones." Ben Curry nodded grimly. "There's a few won't go anywhere. Funny, the only man who ever fooled me was Rigger Molina. I never knew the man was that loyal, yet he stood by me when I was in no shape to fight Lenaker. Took that fight right off my hands. He soaked up lead like a sponge soaks water!"

Ben Curry looked quickly at Dru. "So you know you're the daughter of an outlaw? Well, I'm sorry, Dru. I never aimed for you to know. I was gettin' shet of this business, and planned to settle down on a ranch with your mother and live out the rest of my days plumb peaceful."

"Why don't you?" Dru demanded. He looked up at her, his admiring eyes taking in her slim, well-rounded figure. "You reckon she'll have me?" he asked. "She looked a sight like you when she was younger, Dru."

"Of course, she'll have you! She doesn't know—or didn't know until Julie told her. But I think she guessed. *I* knew. I saw you talking with some men once, and later heard they were outlaws, and then I began hearing about Ben Curry."

Curry looked thoughtfully from Dru to Mike.

"Is there something between you two? Or am I an old fool?"

Mike flushed, and kept his eyes away from Dru.

"He's a fine man, Dru," Doc Sawyer said. "And well educated, if I do say so—who taught him all he knows."

"All he knows!" Roundy stared at Doc with contempt. "Book larnin'! Where would that gal be but for what I told him? How to read sign, how to foller a trail? Where would she be?"

Mike took Dru out to the veranda then.

"I can read sign, all right," he said, "but I'm no hand at reading the trail to a woman's heart. You would have to help me, Dru."

She laughed softly, and her eyes were bright as she slipped her arm through his. "Why, Mike, you've been blazing a trail over and back and up again, ever since I met you in the street at Weaver!"

Suddenly, she sobered. "Mike, let's get some cattle and go back to Peach Meadow Canyon. You said you could make a better trail in, and it would be a wonderful place! Just you and I and—"

"Sure," he said, "in Peach Meadow Canyon."

Roundy craned his head toward the door, then he chuckled.

"That youngster," he said, "he may not know all the trails, but he sure gets where he's goin', he sure does!"

FEATURED NEXT ISSUE

DRY CAMP

A Novel by JAMES CHARLES LYNCH and TODHUNTER BALLARD

Survival of the Weakest

by DUPREE POE

The coyote closed in on White Tail

WHITE TAIL, the mother doe, looked over her shoulder toward the salal thicket where she had left her new-born fawn. She hesitated, as though fearing to proceed on to the lake shore where wildlife pandemonium reigned among the ice flows. For danger stalked the land in the form of fang and claw.

Satisfied that all was well with her fawn, she moved down to the fore-shore where early arriving waterfowl honked and screeched among lily paddies. Nearby, slinking through water tule, she saw a sly red fox for a fleeting second. His red body flashed in sunlight. Sharp fangs snapped on an unfortunate drake. The dying bird flopped and struggled. Mallards rose, honking from the shallows, soaring above the lake's glistening surface. The blood of death scent came to White Tail, sending new panic through her. She retraced her tracks, hurrying back to the thicket in which her fawn lay sleeping. For he was so weak, so completely helpless, if left alone.

The little spotted creature blended naturally against a background of dry leaves, well concealed from any danger. She sniffed him and found that he exuded no natural animal scent that might lead a killer to the retreat.

But an eagle that soared on motionless wings, high overhead, worried White Tail. The protection Nature gave her fawn might not be enough to veil him from those sharp, seeking eyes in the cloudless sky. So, she stood over the little one until the winged destroyer drifted away into the blue and became nothing but a dark speck over the mountains.

Now, the doe moved toward the lake

A Mother Doe Fights to Protect Her Fawn!

shore again, but paused fearfully when two sharp-eyed magpies darted from a treetop at the mouth of the dismally dark canyon that gashed the craggy mountain. Those ravenous birds, she knew, were vicious enough to peck through a fawn's tender skin with their sharp beaks.

To protect her young one, White Tail moved back into the thicket, with the sun's warmth on her back. A sharp, steady buzzing sound startled her. She saw the scaly back of a coiled rattlesnake that had come from some rocky crevice to seek the sun's warmth. The reptile's flat head weaved from side to side. His tongue darted in and out, and he made a hissing noise that mingled with the terrorizing sound of his dry rattlers on that blunt tail.

White Tail leaped into the air and came down with sharp hooves bunched on that mass of coils, cutting the snake to ribbons. She struck again and again, until the reptile ceased to move. Then, she waited until she was sure no other danger threatened her young one, before she left the thicket and moved down to the lush green grazing along the foreshore. She stood in water up to her hocks and reached out with her neck stretched for juicy tidbits among the lily pads. Her sharp hooves gave good purchase when she daringly leaped onto a floating mass of ice and began grazing further beyond the shore.

Then, the ice cake broke through the middle, for it was thinned by the sun's warm breath and the mildness of the weather. White Tail went into the cold water, struggling toward the shore. A plaintive cry came to her over the wind, the cry of her fawn, and she lunged desperately with forefeet catching the solid ground and pulled herself from the water.

In the muskrat runs, she saw a weasel that stood erect and shook a rat in his teeth. He looked at her, went slinking like a shadow into tall grass.

The fawn was hungry when White Tail reached him there in the salal brush. She let him suckle and bathed him fondly with her tongue, smoothing down the sleek, spotted hair.

THROUGHOUT the rest of that first day, she grazed restlessly and attended to her young one, always gripped with the prevailing fear that some stalking denizen of the wilds might find the hiding place and destroy that helpless new-born creature.

When darkness came, she feared the wolves and coyotes, for they were cunning creatures, the most dreaded of all her enemies. Fleet of foot and able to trail other wild creatures while they ran through the night at top speed, they might even ham-string a big doe if they found her.

The night brought a chill to the air, and the cold mingled with the terror in White Tail's heart. For she heard a wolf howling on a ridge beyond where she stood on guard in the shadows. Coyotes yapped in the dark canyon behind her, and a cougar cat screamed to his mate somewhere.

Later, she heard the sound of padded feet slinking through the brush, a big big mountain cat seeking prey. She knew when the animal caught her scent, and she bounded away through the night, leading him away from the little fawn. But she had to use craft and fleetness, too, for she knew that one blow from a great clawed paw would be enough to break her back. She headed down the slope and knew the killer followed like a shadow of death through the night.

Soon, though, she lost the cougar in a wilderness below the canyon and made her way cautiously back up the slope to guard her fawn. She neared the salal thicket, then paused abruptly. For, in moonlight, she saw a coyote nosing along the old trail she had left. He was backtrailing her toward the place where her fawn lay sleeping!

Fearing the coyote more than she did most other wild creatures, White Tail realized that she was safe enough from him if she stood stock-still and remained in the deeper shadows. But, unless she drew his attention to herself, the killer would find her offspring. The doe acted on pure mother instinct.

She made a crashing sound through the undergrowth that startled the coyote. He whipped around, barring wicked fangs in moonlight. With tail between his legs, he started to flee from whatever danger might threaten. Then, he saw that the doe was prey for him, not a danger that threatened him harm. He yapped with delight and lunged down the slope toward her, forgetting the cold trail that led into that salal thicket where the helpless fawn lay.

White Tail fled, running with all her strength. The coyote closed in on her, slashing at her tender underside with his sharp, murderous fangs. Those fangs might disembowel her while she fled, or ham-string her, bringing her down. They cut her sides and nipped at her legs. She saw those wicked, yellow eyes that gleamed in moonlight. She fled for her life, with hot blood fresh on her left flank, now. The tendons in that leg felt numb, but she put more power, somehow, into her mad, wild flight.

At the lake shore, she almost went to her knees. The coyote leaped close, snapping at her throat, for the kill. Her sharp hooves drove him back. Now, she gained her feet, splashed through water tules into the shallows and leaped onto a floating cake of ice.

She whipped around, making her last stand, facing the coyote now. His padded feet offered no purchase on the slippery ice. Her sharp hooves served well as spikes to keep her from slipping. She lashed out at him, knocking him into the water. He yelped with surprise and pain.

He reached for the ice with his forefeet. White Tail now had the advantage. Her sharp hooves slashed down at that ugly head. The doe was merciless. She struck again and again, until that battered thing sank slowly into the clear, moonlit water. His body reflected in moonlight for a moment, under the surface, before the currents moved the lifeless thing toward the distant river.

White Tail licked her wounds and stood in the cold, black mud until the fever and pain left her.

Then, the morning sun was warm on her back. She turned up the slope and found her spotted fawn shivering under a blanket of dew in the salal thicket. And her fighting mother's heart throbbed with a great contentment. For the little one was safe, and there seemed to be a feeling of peace and security in the knowledge that she was strong and brave enough to protect her own.

Beginnings of the

CATTLE BUSINESS

By TEX GAINSVILLE

CATTLE raising began in the southwest, not only because the Spaniards first introduced their sharp-horned Andalusian animals here, but because of the weather. For a long time it was thought that cattle could never stand the terrible winters of the northern states like Montana and Wyoming, or even the higher altitudes of New Mexico. Moreover, much of this territory was arid, and appeared on maps as The Great American Desert. Its sparse, dry brown vegetation seemed incapable of nourishing a gopher.

Yet wagon trains crossing the divide, army men, farmers crossing to Oregon or California, drove cattle with them. And all these noted with amazement, how eagerly their cattle grazed on this brown, sparse growth and how very nourishing it seemed. It cured on the stem like hay, and despite the appalling low temperatures of winter, it did not freeze and rot, but remained sweet and palatable for cows.

The secondary discovery was made that cattle could stand the winters very well, if they had enough to eat. About this angle a whole collection of myths has sprung up. One legend gives credit to "Colonel" Jack Henderson, a freighter, for founding the entire cattle industry of the Rocky Mountain country.

The legend relates that Henderson dared the blizzards of winter in 1858 to haul a load of supplies to the settlements on Cherry Creek. Arriving there with his ox-drawn wagons, he found himself unable to care for the oxen and with no market to sell them.

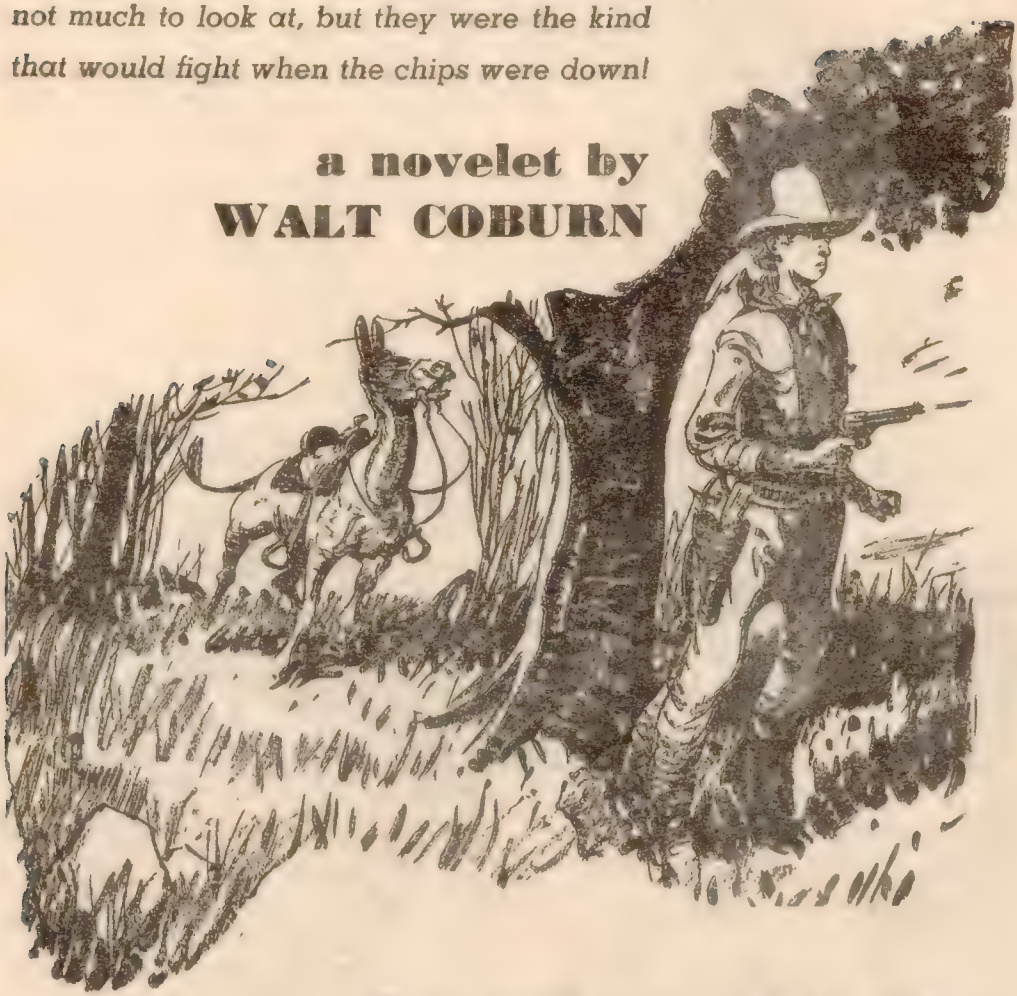
Thereupon, he turned them loose to shift for themselves or die.

The next spring, out on a buffalo hunt, Henderson ran across his old oxen, fat, sassy and in better health than ever. He drove them back to Denver and spread the word about his discovery.

This, however, is a legend with about as much truth in it as most legends. The fact is that many others had earlier or simultaneously made the same discovery. And so the first faint beginnings of a cow country outside of Texas began, waiting only for a market before it should boom.

This gangling kid and his mongrel pet were not much to look at, but they were the kind that would fight when the chips were down!

a novelet by
WALT COBURN



Sorry Sid's

AT exactly one hour before daybreak, old Chisholm McEgan came awake out of a sound sleep. He blinked and batted his eyes a couple of times.

He lay there, wide awake, in his old roundup bed on the ground under the open sky with the tarp pulled up over his head, shivering a little under the old bed tarp and blankets and soogans. He had crawled into bed fully clothed save for his hat and boots and faded old denim brush jacket.

He fished in the pocket of his old patched, faded-out blue flannel shirt and found his tobacco sack and cigarette papers. He rolled a quick cigarette and shoved it in his trap-like mouth. Then he pawed back the tarp and sat up, pulling on a battered old Stetson hat.

He struck a match on the dry inside

Ketch Dog

of the bed tarp and held the match flame cupped in his gnarled brush-scabbed hands. Pulling the smoke deep into his lungs, he let it drift out through his nostrils. He held the match flame cupped to warm the horny palms of his hands until it burned down. Then he pulled his old denim brush jacket out from under the soogans and put it on and buttoned it from waistband to collar.

It had rained during the night and his old bed tarp had sprung a few leaks. The jacket was still damp from yesterday's rain. When he pulled his boots from under the tarp they were still wet. The spurs had not been taken off and the spur rowels tinkled dismally. He had a tussle getting each tight-fitting shopmade boot on. The lighted cigarette hanging from a corner of his gray, stub-

bled mouth, he grunted and cussed in a creaky nasal monotone.

His cussing was as habitual as a religious man's morning prayer. Meaningless, he cussed the life of a cowboy. He cussed his own greasy-sack cow outfit. He cussed the rheumatic knots in his old broken bones. It was sort of a blasphemous litany. He cussed the world in general.

It had quit raining toward morning. He cocked an eye skyward but could see no stars. It was pitch black and he could feel, rather than see, the heavy, thick damp mountain fog that billowed all around him.

OLD CHIZ had dreaded throwing back the tarp from his head. He was getting along in his sixties and his knotted bones were becoming stiff-jointed and stove up. He dreaded the cold damp chill and the raw bite of the outside wind on his still-damp clothes. He dreaded saddling a cold-backed horse that was bound to pitch a little, hogging it off down through the brush and boulders from his range branding camp.

His ketch-rope would be wet and stiff as a steel cable. The ground underfoot would be slick and slippery and treacherous and if he matched a race down the mountainside after a wild maverick he took big chances on picking up a fall.

So in the hour before daybreak when a man's life's spirits are said to be at ebb tide, he cussed it all and laid it aside as the life of a brush popper cowhand. He was the owner of a little Arizona cow outfit, a greasy sack, one man spread in the mountains where the cow country stands on end and every bush has thorny spines, catclaw and mesquite.

Gray-haired, a week's stubble on his lean-jawed face, Chisholm McEgan, known throughout the cow country as Old Chiz, was small-statured and leathery and tough as rawhide. Shivering as the chill fog bit through his damp clothes and tough hide and into the marrow of his bones, he grinned flatly and nodded his approval at the heavy mountain fog.

"Jest what the doc ordered."

He was up on his feet, stomping them into his wet, tight boots, cussing the hole in the toe of one sock. He squatted and made his bed, shaking little puddles of water from the tarp before he rolled it and tied it with the bed rope.

He got a fire kindled and made a pot of fresh coffee. Jerky and beans and dutch oven biscuits were warmed over from last night's supper. Then he filled the gunnysack nearly full of barley and hung it over the ears of his hobbled horse. He saddled the horse with the gelding at grain, to set the saddle and let 'er soak warm on the cold back while Chiz ate breakfast.

The fire warmed his stomach while the cold shivers ran along his backbone. He held the hot cup of strong black coffee in both his hands to warm them. He wolfed his breakfast. It was a temptation to linger here at the fire with his coffee and cigarette squatted on his hunkers, round-shouldered and humpbacked against the cold.

"Time's a-slippin'. Any man kin be a coffee cooler." Chiz tossed his empty cup and plate and knife and fork in the dishpan and left them. He covered his rawhide kyack boxes with an old tarp.

He buckled on his old patched chaps and fastened them with the two upper snaps. He bridled his horse and pulled the front cinch tight and gave the breast strap rigging a tug to test it for tightness. Chiz McEgan's remuda of horses and pack mules was small. But he rode the best cow horses in Arizona and his pack mules were tops, though salty, cold-backed of a chilly morning.

Chiz shoved a boot into one tapadero-covered stirrup and eased up into the saddle and got his right stirrup. It was still dark. The brushy boulder-strewn ground was on a slant and the wet ground slick. He yanked down his old shapeless Stetson at a jack-deuce angle on his grizzled head.

"Let's git 'er outa your system, pony." He gigged his horse gently with the spurs.

The horse hopped off, crow-hopping a few jumps. Chiz never reached for the saddle horn and did not attempt to yank the horse's head up. He rode clean and easy. Chiz McEgan had been a good bronc stomper in his day and never yet asked a younger man to uncock a horse that had buck in his system.

The horse's head came up and he steadied down to a long high trot. He was wise as a tree full of owls. Too wise to waste time pitching in the rocks and brush. Chiz shoved a right hand up under the seat of his Levi's and sat on it to warm it. Old Chiz McEgan had never owned a pair of gloves in his life.

"I was born with a hide to cover 'em." Thrifty, old Chiz called it. No use wastin' money on gloves. "By gollies" He looked down his nose at a cowhand who wore gloves, and most of them did in the brushy thorny country. He called them Gentle Annies.

His missus or his daughter Bonnie always gave Chiz a pair of gloves each Christmas. He would thank them and fold them carefully in his pocket. Then swap them for something he really needed. A caddie of Bull Durham. Or a pound or two of chewing tobacco.

Most cowhands owned a one-man tepee for bad weather, when it rained or snowed. Chiz swapped the one his missus gave him one Christmas for a little copper-coiled whiskey still. He stilled his own corn likker and it was potent. Half a pint would make the drunk come. On rare occasions when he offered a man a drink from his bottle, it was apt to gag him and he'd cough and sputter. What went down his gullet left his lining raw. No man in his right mind ever took a second drink of old Chiz McEgan's corn likker.

"It takes a man," Chiz would say.

HIS range branding camp was on the far edge of his own range in Brushy Basin. Ten minutes riding at a long trot and he rimmed out and through a saddle and was over onto the fringe of the big Hourglass range. The first faint gray streak of daybreak showed him the white mountain fog all around him.

"Fer a leetle maverickin'." He bit off a corner of plug tobacco he carried in his chaps pocket with his hogging string. "The early bird ketches the worm."

There was nothing furtive about old Chiz. He was tough as an old boot, reckless, wilder than the wildest of the wild brush-popper cowhands. He would open up a pony on the steepest slant on earth, when a slickeared maverick broke the trail down through brush and boulders, where any other cowboy would pull up. Twisting the devil's tail, Chiz called it.

There was no fear in the man. Only the wild excitement of the race he matched with a maverick or some big outlaw steer. You'd think he'd have outgrown it. But Chiz McEgan never had or never would out-grow it. It was his life.

Foxy—for long weeks before the fall roundup commenced working, old Chiz had been at it, slipping out of Brushy Basin and over onto the big Hourglass range. But he never once heated the running iron he packed in a saddle scabbard. He'd locate some big calf following an Hourglass cow. He'd rope and hogtie the calf. Earmark it in the Hourglass earmark. Underbit the left. Overslope the right. And turn it loose. One-two-mebbyso three calves. Then he'd call it a day and be back on his Brushy Basin range and the home ranch by nine o'clock.

When the Hourglass roundup worked the range, gathering beef and branding what the calf roundup had missed in the way of unbranded calves, more than likely the cowpunchers would pass up any sleeper marked calf when they read the Hourglass earmarks. Where the cattle are wild and the country is rough, the cowboys watch the running cattle for anything with slick ears. And they don't bother to gather any calves with earmarks when they are following Hourglass cows.

Only once in a while when a cowboy gets close enough and can't make out any brand on an earmarked calf, is it roped. But the chances are fifty to one in favor of old Chiz McEgan.

Then a week or two after the roundup has moved on, perhaps when it was weaning time, old Chiz would slip over to gather his sleeper marked calves and ease the weaned calves over into Brushy Basin. Chiz would rope and hogtie the calves, change the Hourglass earmarks into his earmarks and run his U2 brand on their hides. Then he'd turn them loose with a bunch of gentle cattle on good feed and water in Brushy Basin.

"If this part of the Arizona cow country was to take a straw vote for the orneriest, chinchiest, stingiest, maverickingest, champeen wildest brush-popper greasy-sack cowman, old Chisholm McEgan would win hands down."

It was big Tom Wagner, known as "Wag", ramrod of the big Hourglass outfit, who said that. And he repeated it often and whenever the occasion offered.

Old Chiz had heard it often enough. And he grinned his flat grin and said nothing. But the old rascal would draw out in the dirt or wet a gnarled forefinger and mark it on the bar—McEgan's

registered brand—U2. He'd cackle to himself, and wipe out the U2 brand with the heel of his hand. And into his sky-blue, puckered eyes would come a twinkle.

But let any other man say a disparaging word against old Chiz and Tom Wagner, ramrod of the big Hourglass, would shore take it up.

"That old son earns anything he kin run his U2 iron on!" Tom Wagner told the owners of the big Hourglass, when they jumped him about Chiz McEgan rustling mavericks on their range.

"Here's your ramrod job," Wag told them. "Give it to somebody who's low down mean enough to bother that ol' rascal."

Tom Wagner still ramrodded the Hourglass. When the roundup worked along the Brushy Basin, old Chiz would show up with his string of top cowhorses and his bed mule. And Tom Wagner would cuss him out and hooraw Chiz until that crotchety temper of his came to a boil and foamed over.

Old Chiz would yank off his battered Stetson and slam it down on the ground and tromp it, fire in his blue eyes and gnarled fists knotted. That's what Tom Wagner wanted.

Wagner, six feet tall, two hundred pounds and getting a little paunchy, would turn quickly and get away and onto his horse. And his big, deep, hearty laugh would come back to old Chiz, tromping his hat in futile rage.

Nobody in the outfit would dare crack a smile. Grins had to be wiped off. But the whole insides of the brush-popper cowboys would ache from holding the laughter pent up.

Directly, his cranky fury spent, old Chiz would pick up his tromped hat and slam it alongside his old leather chaps and yank it down on his grizzled head. And the hot sparks would die in his puckered eyes and into their sky blue would come a roguish twinkle.

"One of these days, I'll go to town. I'll walk into the store and pick me out the best 5X beaver Jawn B that money kin buy, and I'll charge it to Wag."

II

ONCE at the Hourglass home ranch, Sorry Sid Sampson, the kid who tended the windmill and rode the horse pasture fence and packed salt on pack mules to the salt licks, made a grave and fatal mistake. Sorry Sid wanted more than anything on earth to be a wild brush-popper like old Chiz McEgan.

Tom Wagner had worked old Chiz up to the boiling-over point. While the rest of the cowhands stood back and covertly watched, Chiz yanked off his old hat and started to tromp it.

Sorry Sid was a lanky, awkward, speckly-faced sandy-haired kid with a long nose bothered by hay fever and a prominent Adam's apple that bobbed up and down in his skinny neck like the float on a fish line, whenever he got excited. His face got white and whiter until the freckles stood out like warts. He couldn't stand it any longer to see big Wag pouring down abuse on a little old man half his size.

He had a brand new cartridge belt and holster and a fancy pearl-handled silver-mounted six-shooter hidden away in his warsack, a gun he buckled on only in strict privacy. He went into the bunkhouse and dug into his warsack under his bed tarp, and with trembling, shaky hands he got the fancy gun and shoved it inside his shirt. His big hound ketch-dog followed him.

His knees were shaking as he walked up to big Tom Wagner. He was at the awkward, ungainly age when his voice was changing.

"You big—big bully. You pick on somebody your own age and your own size." Sorry Sid's voice dropped to a deep bass, then rocketed to a thin treble. He stuttered when he got excited.

"Fi . . . fill . . . your . . . your hand!"

Sorry Sid pulled his fancy gun. It shook so that every man in the outfit was dodging and trying to get behind something.

Tom Wagner stared at Sorry Sid, slack-jawed. Sid kept pulling and jerking at the trigger of the single action .45 six-shooter. He'd forgotten to thumb back the gun hammer. Hunters call it buck fever.

Old Chiz was glaring wildly at Sorry Sid. Then he leaped. He slapped the gun out of Sorry Sid's hand. He swarmed all over the kid and Sorry Sid went down. Chiz would have beaten him to a pulp if Tom Wagner had not grabbed him and pulled him off. Old Chiz was white-faced and bathed with cold sweat and cussing Sorry Sid for all the names he could lay tongue to.

"You better fork your horse," some cowpuncher told Sorry Sid, "And ride. Don't come back till old Chiz has simmered down."

Sorry Sid had ridden off, his ketch-dog following his horse.

Old Chiz had never forgiven Sorry Sid for that well-meaning blunder. And that had been all of five years ago. The mention of Sorry Sid's name would start old Chiz cussing. The cowman couldn't stand the sight of him.

He even went so far as to tell his missus that if ever that Sorry Sid thing showed up at the ranch, to take the broom to him. He told his daughter Bonnie if she even so much as looked at Sorry Sid at one of the cow country dances, he'd turn her over his knee, grown as she was, and tan her backside. His missus and Bonnie held their silence.

Later, Sorry Sid had it explained to him by Tom Wagner. But the damage was done and nothing on earth could be done about it. Absolutely nothing. Only a miracle. And nobody around the Hourglass had ever heard tell of any miracle.

Which did not destroy any of Sorry Sid's belief in old Chiz McEgan In that boy's book Chiz stood high and above every other wild brush-popper cowhand in the world. If only he could be half as wild and reckless! Just let him build up half that kind of a rep and he was willing to die young.

Sorry Sid and his ketch-dog, Brin. Two of a kind, unwelcome as the plague around a cow camp. If there was ever a place where a man could possibly get around a bunch of cattle or on a round up, Sorry Sid would be right there. He'd do the wrong thing.

Tom Wagner had tried him out a few times, always with disastrous results. He'd get lost outside his own horse pasture. Then he'd bob up just at the wrong time with his ketch-dog, where the cowhands were holding a bunch of wild cattle. He'd let out a wild whoop and holler and there'd go the little gatherment of cattle the cowboys had spent all morning fetching into the holdup grounds. Spilled, scattered—the hard work undone in that one short moment. And that wasn't the half of it.

THE alleged ketch-dog was apt to get excited. His mammy and daddy had been great ketch-dogs in their day, but none of their wisdom was in their whelp. He was a big dog of mixed breeding, part bull terrier, part hound, part great Dane. When he got excited he would charge and his powerful jaws would fasten onto the tail of some cowboy's mount and the terrified horse would pitch and buck and bawl and throw its rider like as not.

Sorry Sid would gather the big brindle dog in his arms, stuttering, tears in his eyes. He'd beg them not to kill his dog. Brin was the only friend he had on earth.

"Git for home and take that idiot dog along. I hope you both git so lost we'll never hear of either of you any more!" Tom Wagner was torn between rage and amusement.

So Sorry Sid and his ketch-dog Brin were doomed to stay at the home ranch. He was the best windmill tender and ranch hand the Hourglass had ever had. He was faithful and he had a knack for repairing the windmill that was always going busted. He kept the pasture fence up as no other man ever had. And when Sorry Sid loaded his pack mules with salt cakes to go to the salt licks he was happier than happy.

He had his mail-order saddle rigged with breast-strap roping gear. In the pocket of his chaps he packed a hogging string. The ketch-rope on his saddle had a tie slip-knot in the end to slip over the saddle horn and tie hard and fast. He packed a running iron in a scabbard on his saddle. And he never missed the chance to scrape his cowhide chaps, or the snubnose tapaderos that covered his stirrups, on a catclaw or spiny mesquite brush to give them a hard-worn look such as the brush-popper cowboy's rig was marked.

He even contemplated, during the lonesome hours at the ranch, wearing down the front of his chaps on the grindstone so that he could sew patches on like old Chiz. But he thought better of the idea and hit upon the notion of swapping his good chaps for the old wore-out patched pair that belonged to Chiz McEgan.

When he figured the sign was right Sorry Sid offered to swap even with old Chiz.

Chiz hit the sky. He chinned the moon. His voice creaking like a rusty hinge, he cussed Sorry Sid out with vitriolic tongue until the kid backed

away and the hair along the ketch-dog's ruff bristled and his white fangs bared in a snarl. One word from Sorry Sid and the Brin dog would have tackled the ornery, cranky old greasy-sack cowman.

"These leggin's," creaked old Chiz, "will do me. Whenever I want new leggin's I'll buy 'em. And they won't be Injuned up with them nickel-plated conchos that blind a man. Git outa my sight you Sorry thing afore I double a wet rope acrost your withers!" Old Chiz was snorting. "Take that flea-bit mangy mongrel along with you or I'll knock it in the head."

Sorry Sid's warm brown eyes were filled with a hurt look as he backed away, taking the Brin dog with him. The heck of it was he couldn't explain. Nobody would understand if he tried to tell why he wanted those patched old worn-out chaps. He had no notion of charity in his heart. He'd be proud to wear Chiz McEgan's old chaps. He took his shame and humiliation and his hurt along as he rode the horse pasture fence. Tears blinded him. The Brin dog sensed the boy's grief and trotted behind, head and tail down, sharing Sorry Sid's dejection.

Sorry Sid took his brand new 3X Stetson hat and soaked it in the tank and pulled it out of shape. When he got off by himself he slammed it on the ground and tromped on it and slapped dust out of it against his chaps and yanked it down on his head jack-deuce.

Sorry Sid studied old Chiz when he walked. He patterned his gait after the grizzled cowman's. Chiz was bowlegged and walked with a slight limp. Sorry Sid managed a pigeon-toed, knock-kneed limp until he wore his cheap store boots over at the heels.

The whole outfit was onto him. Sorry Sid fooled nobody but himself. Tom Wagner waited until they were all there and he watched Sorry Sid while he limped around the supper fire.

"Kinda stove up, ain't you, button? Few more hard years you'll be ready to pension off. Us old hands git that way sooner or later. It's called saddle rheumatics. You're gittin' so bowlegged a calf could run betwixt your laigs." Then Wag topped it off with a careless remark. "You're gettin' to be more like that ornery old Chiz, every day."

The Hourglass cowhands wiped off their grins and from under low-pulled hat brims swapped looks. They saw Sorry Sid's face color up under that rare compliment. Limping on his run-over boots, he piled grub on his tin plate and squatted on his hunkers to pour coffee from the big black coffeepot into his tin cup.

"You suffer much pain?" Wag poured it on. A man with a mouthful of coffee and jerky choked and spat and coughed.

"Sometimes in rainy weather, Wag." The Sorry kid tried to put a creaky sound into his changing voice.

Tom Wagner wiped the grin off his face.

But despite Wag's ribbing and gentle hoorawing, every man in the outfit could not help but feel sorry for Sid. There was something about the kid's hero worship of ornery old Chiz that pinched the heart of every brush-popper cowhand a little. It was somehow pathetic.

Once Wag lost patience with old Chiz and cussed him out flatly and the Hourglass ramrod meant it, every word.

"That poison, ingrowed disposition of yourn, Chiz. It won't actually kill you to treat Sorry Sid halfway human. That button would lay down and die for you, you ornery ol' tarantula. And he'd take his ketch-dog with him when he done it. You let up on Sorry Sid. Or cut your string. Nobody'll miss you if you take your ponies along back to Brushy Basin." Wag turned away and left old Chiz glaring after him.

III

SORRY SID was in his glory as he led his pack mules, tied head-to-tail, packing salt to the salt licks. He had his fancy pearl-handled six-shooter shoved in his chaps pocket, like the other cowhands, in case they sighted a coyote or lobo wolf, or in case a man got a horse jerked down and a snuffy steer at the end of the ketch-rope charged. He rode along watching the shadow he cut, dreaming brave heroic dreams, patterning his ways after old Chiz McEgan.

It so happened that Sorry Sid was camped at Hackberry Springs scattering salt, that early dawn in the mountain fog.

"While you're up there," Wag told Sorry Sid, "take a day or two. Dig the spring out. Tear out what planks are rotted and put in new ones. Repair the

trough, plumb down to the tank. There is apt to be a few gaps in the trap-pasture that need fixin'. There's a spool of barb-wire and hammer and staples. Set ary post that needs re-settin' or replace it with a new 'un. And take a look along the brushy wings that fan out from the gate.

"But don't git at it till after sunrise and quit before sundown. Them wild cattle water at night and they're apt to start comin' in around sundown and at daybreak. Them wild 'uns don't come to water till they're two-three days dry so don't bother 'em from drinkin'. And for gosh sakes don't go charging 'em with that fool ketch-dawg of yourn. No matter if all the slick eared mavericks in Arizona show up. You'll only spook 'em and make 'em that much harder for the cowboys to ketch.

"You mind now, Sid, or I've got a mind to wean you away from that well rope you got tied hard and fast, and take your dawg away."

"I won't bother 'em, Wag. I'll lay low and just git a tally on what mavericks come to water," Sorry Sid promised. "Gosh, I shore like to watch them wild burros come in at Hackberry Springs. Them little bitty 'uns would sure make good pets."

Wag snorted. "Pets! Like that family of skunks you tamed. Stunk up the whole blame outfit till the boys had to burn their clothes Wild burros eat the grass that should go to put taller on cattle."

"Wild horses," mused Sorry Sid. "I seen some good 'uns in the wild bunch, last time I was at Hackberry Springs."

"Them good 'uns you seen was renegade saddle horses that strayed into the wild bunch of two-bit horses. You'll git a chance to see 'em close after the horse roundup. When the wild bunch is hazed into the Hackberry Spring trap. Don't try your hand at ketchin' 'em. That's final."

"Nope. You got my word for it, Wag."

"There's the odd chance you might sight that Brahma Bull. The Cross T yonder side of the mountain raises Brahmas. Their prize bull up and quit their range. There's a hundred dollar reward on the Brahma Bull. He just might show up.

"Now listen close to what I'm telling you, Sid. Drop a couple of salt cakes near the tank inside the trap. If the Brahma Bull just happens to go in the trap with a bunch of them wild cattle, you slip down to the pole gate. It's tied back and open. You untie the pole gate and shut it and go easy and careful about it. Just shut the gate and fasten it shut and ease back and away. And then you ride over to where the outfit's camped on the Cibicue. And let me know.

"Mind, you don't spook that big Brahma Bull. Because he's apt to charge you. And all hell can't stop him because he's rank poison. He'll go through that ten-wire tight trap fence like it ain't there. Last time he strayed off, it took just four good cowhands, and they was well mounted, to get their ropes on him and stretched out. That Brahma Bull has gored a few horses and crippled a few good cowhands. He's rank poison. I don't want to lose a good windmill boy and his ketch-dawg." Then a twinkle came into Tom Wagner's gray eyes.

"Not even old Chiz McEgan is man enough to tackle that Brahma Bull. When I told old Chiz there was a hundred dollar reward on the Brahma, he just snorted and faunched and spit terbaccer juice. Whenever old Chiz meets that bull, he's over-matched hisself."

Up in the mountain fog, Sorry Sid had his roan mule saddled. Wag had told him the roan mule Strawberry beat any horse in his string of pensioned-off old cow horses. He had a breast strap and breeching rigged to hold his saddle because a low-withered, narrow-rumped mule can skin himself out of a saddle. And he kept an eye on the ketch-dog Brin. Hackberry springs was up high on the mountain where the cattle were wild and it was the roughest cow country on the Hourglass range. Wild cattle, wild horses, wild burros. Even the blacktail and mule deer were gentler, when they came to water and to lick the big salt cakes.

HE had been up there for nearly a week. He'd dug out the spring and repaired the plank trough that led to the tank. He fixed the trap pasture ten-wire fence. He mended breaks in the barb-wire wings that were cleverly camouflaged by high brush. His chores had been done with a thorough but almost feverish haste. Now he had time to spare and he lingered on.

Yesterday it had rained and he had bushed up and waited but he hadn't broken any of the hidebound Hourglass

rules as laid down by Wag.

He had been tempted to trap a young burro to tame. The loop in his ketch-rope had itched in his hand whenever a maverick showed. And he tallied the unbranded calves. He couldn't see any Hourglass brand on some of those big calves in the Hourglass earmark. He'd tallied five big 'uns, sleeper-marked; two big yearlings, and what looked to him to be two-year old critters, all earmarked. But he couldn't for the life of him, and his brown eyes were sharp, read any Hourglass brand on their hides.

But mostly he kept watching for the big Brahma Bull. Chiz McEgan called that breed of cattle Bremmers. So Sorry Sid did likewise and called it the Bremmer Bull.

"You keep a watch now, Brin. For that Bremmer Bull. I never seen a Bremmer. But he's got a hump on his back like a buffalo. And he's big as an elephant. Straight long horns, Wag says. With big brass knobs to blunt the tips. You'll see them big brass knobs a-shinin'. But don't charge 'im. You savvy that, Brin." Sorry Sid always talked to the big brindle dog as though he were a human and understood every word he said. To that Sorry Sid would take an oath on a high stack of Bibles.

The big dog's ears were ragged. His head was a bull terrier's head with powerful jaws. He'd tackle anything, even a mountain lion. Sorry Sid had watched the big Brin dog sniff the mountain lion tracks around Hackberry Springs, growling deep, his back hairs bristled.

The heavy fog rolled and billowed around the camp. Sometimes it was so dense the visibility was cut down to fifty feet. And in the high mountain silence, the sounds came magnified and eerie. Wild cattle coming to water, breaking through the heavy manzanita brush, sounded like ten times the size of the few head that showed up in the fog.

It was kind of spooky. Sorry Sid sat his Strawberry mule and he had his rope down and a big blocker loop built and the rope dropped down across his saddle horn. Just in case.

The ketch-dog lay half crouched beside the mule. Wiry haired, each brindle hair along the dog's back was bristled and standing. Brin kept up that low growling warning. His yellow eyes watched the big hackberry trees that gave Hackberry Springs its name. His ragged ears were erect. He'd kept up his growling since he had smelled the fresh mountain lion tracks.

Sorry Sid had never seen a mountain lion. He'd been warned, if he sighted a lion, to let it strictly alone and to keep his ketch-dog away, if he didn't want the dog to get himself ripped apart.

"Keep your mind on that Bremmer Bull, Brin. Ever since you found them lion tracks you bin in a state. I told you what Wag said. Let them lions alone. You want to get clawed to pieces?" Sorry Sid's voice was a hushed whisper.

A little bunch of wild burros were drifting in to water. Their small hoofs clattered on the rocks and tap-tapped up out of the fog.

"Purty. Them little bitty burro colts is shore purty. . ."

The fog billowed clear for a moment. Sorry Sid sighted cattle inside the trap. He sucked in his breath. His brown eyes bugged out. There, inside the big trap pasture, near the tank and the chunks of salt, was an animal that bulked huge in the fog. A dun colored animal. With a big hump like a buffalo on its withers. The Bremmer Bull!

PETRIFIED in his saddle, Sid was unable for a long moment to move or breathe. His heart was pumping wildly and the rapid pulsing of it felt as though it were struck in his throat. Dazed, stunned, he was hypnotized by the sight of that big Bremmer Bull.

There was only one brass ball on the tip of one horn. The other had been knocked off and the tip of the horn splintered and jagged.

Then the heavy fog billowed down and hid the little bunch of wild mountain cattle and the Bremmer Bull from sight, shutting them off from Sorry Sid's staring eyes. Only then did he snap out of his dazed, gaping trance.

Suddenly the silence was ripped apart and shattered by a squealing scream of stark terror. Sorry Sid jumped in his saddle and let out a thin, startled sound. He'd once caught a young burro and it had squealed like that. Shrill, ear-splitting in its terror. Sorry Sid had let it go. It had an almost human cry in its stark fear.

With a low, snarling growl, the big Brin ketch-dog leapt from its crouch.

Brin was charging something. Something down yonder by the big hackberry trees.

The Strawberry mule lunged and jumped, stampeding. It almost threw Sorry Sid. He lost his right stirrup and grabbed at the saddle horn, yanking at the mule. The big blocker loop fouled the mule's legs and the mule was kicking, trying to pitch.

Then came a sound Sorry Sid had never heard before—Brin, snarling, growling, then letting out a wailing howl. As though he was calling desperately for Sorry Sid's help. The howl was cut short just as the Strawberry mule bucked Sorry Sid off.

He landed hard and for a second the wind was knocked out of him. He scrambled to his feet.

The fog billowed clear. He was within fifty feet of the scene: A dead young burro—the ketch-dog Brin sprawled, motionless—a big mountain lion crouched over its kill. Its glittering yellow cat eyes were watching Sorry Sid.

"Brin!" Sorry Sid's voice yelled. "Brin!" His voice shrilled and broke in two on the high shrill scream.

Sorry Sid was chalky white and the freckles stood out like black warts on his slack-jawed face. His brown eyes wide. Terror and fear gripped him. His breath came in quick sobs. Then Sorry Sid's brown eyes reddened. He did not remember jerking the fancy pearl-handled silver mounted six-shooter from the pocket of his chaps.

Not until he felt the recoil of the exploding gun jerk in his hand was he aware of it. He saw the big tawny mountain lion spring from its crouch, high and long, wicked fangs bared, yellow eyes gleaming. A leaping tawny giant cat in mid-air. He thumbed back the hammer and pulled the trigger. He hadn't time to aim. Just pointed the gun and shot. And he saw the lion come down out of the air, landing limply and rolling sideways, its four great legs threshing, the claws on the huge paws bared, and the long tail lashing. Not twenty feet away.

Sorry Sid felt no fear at all. Only a terrible urge to kill. He stood there on his run-over boots, sobbing, thumbing the gun hammer and pulling the trigger. Until the mountain lion quit that wild threshing and the tail no longer lashed the air. Sorry Sid kept on thumbing the gun hammer and pulling the trigger and the hammer kept snapping down on the exploded empty shells. And somehow Sorry Sid knew then that the lion was dead.

Then he untracked himself and started running. He had to jump over the lion's dead carcass to reach his ketch-dog. He went down on the ground beside the big brindle dog and dropped his gun. He took the dog in his arms, trying to wipe the blood off the bristled hair with his hands. He was all over blood, even his face that was buried against the ketch-dog's head. And tears were streaming down his face unchecked.

IV

OLD Chiz McEgan was what they called sot in his ways. He never owned a watch because he had no need for a watch. He was awake every morning at exactly an hour before daylight. From daylight on, he'd take a squint at the sun and match his sun time against any man's watch. He bedded down anytime after dark when he got sleepy.

Standing night guard on the roundup, he told time by the moon and stars. If he was to stand third guard he was awake and had his hat and boots on and a cigarette in his mouth when the second guard called "third guard relief." No need for his guard partner to waste a match looking at the hands of the guard watch. Chiz would ride in when it was time to call last guard. Right on the dot.

Old Chiz was as accurate and certain about lots of other things. He knew, for instance, exactly how many sleeper-marked big calves he'd locate at Hackberry Springs. How many big mavericks, slick-eared and sleeper-marked, yearlings and two-year olds that had evaded his running iron.

He knew where the Hourglass roundup was camped over on the Cibicue. He knew in this mountain fog the wild cattle would be sifting in under its white blanket to water and lick salt. He knew the habits of wild cattle. When they broke brush, he knew which direction they'd head. Everything there was to know about the habits of wild mountain cattle, old Chiz knew. And he knew how to out-figure the wild 'uns.

The outfit had worked the country

around Hackberry Springs and moved on a week ago. Barring bad luck there wouldn't be a cowboy within ten miles when old Chiz got there. He was making bets against himself as to how many big mavericks he'd ketch in the trap when he eased the big pole gate shut on 'em.

When he got up within half a mile of the Hackberry Springs camp, Old Chiz shifted his course and rode against the wind. Just as a big-game hunter stalks his game, so the wind won't carry his man-scent.

Barring hard luck, Old Chiz stood to run his brand on at least two-three big mavericks and a sleeper-marked calf or two that would be in the trap. The sign was right and he felt it in his bones.

And if he happened to jump that big Bremmer Bull, he'd show that nosy Wag how to get the job done ketchin' the Bremmer. He'd tie that Bremmer Bull up to a big hackberry saplin'. Then he'd ride over to the Cibicue and tell Wag to fork over an order on the Cross T Bremmer outfit for the hundred smackers for the Bremmer Bull they'd find tied there in the shade of the hackberry saplin'.

"I'd shore be proud," Old Chiz told himself as he neared Hackberry Springs, "to match me a race with that Bremmer Bull."

As he rode nearer, Old Chiz had his rope coiled in his left hand and a loop built and slung over his right shoulder to keep it from hanging up in the brush. As he rode close or in under mesquite limbs he ducked or bent low along his horse's neck, automatically and without noticing, and never a lost motion. A man could never tell when he'd jump a maverick. And his thoughts dwelt almost lovingly on the big Bremmer Bull. He was riding his top horse and his pulse quickened and he felt excitement tautening every nerve. The heavy fog rolled and billowed down over horse and rider within a hundred yards of Hackberry Springs.

Then hell busted loose yonder in the fog blanket. It jarred Old Chiz like an earthquake, shattering the silence and jangling the old cowman's taut nerves. The terrified squeal of a young burro colt was followed by the snarling growl of a ketch-dog charging, and the next second the wailing howl of the dog. And what sounded like a horse pitching.

Old Chiz rode up, cussing in a creaking, croaking whisper, seething inside with a terrible rage. It boiled up and over until his slitted eyes were slivers of blue fire and his voice choked in his corded throat.

"Barrin' hard luck! That worthless, useless, no-good, two-bit, Sorry Sid! Should have bin' choked to death the minute he was borned. Shootin' would be too easy on that batter-spoiling windmill tender and his idiot ketch-dog. The pair of 'em! I got harmful murder in me. I got—"

AS if the noise of the ruckus yonder split the fog apart, the white blanket lifted like a curtain. Old Chiz broke off in the middle of his cussing, staring, slack-jawed, at that tense little sight that was like some stage-act.

Chiz stared, and was held paralyzed by what he saw. The biggest lion he'd ever sighted was crouched over a dead young burro. A dozen feet away, where the lion had slapped him, lay Brin, the ketch-dog, and the dog looked dead.

Sorry Sid was on his feet, facing the crouched lion, standing spread-legged his hat pulled over his eyes. Sorry Sid jerked the fancy six-shooter from his chaps pocket, the silver mounted barrel shining. He never lifted the gun higher than the belt of his chaps. The gun roared, loud as a cannon. The lion sprang. Then Sorry Sid shot at it again while the lion was in mid-air and Chiz saw the tawny fur of its belly puff when the .45 slug hit it. Blood gushed from the snarling mouth where Sorry Sid sent his first bullet.

Then the lion landed limp-legged and rolled over. Dying when it hit the ground, its paws threshed, clawing the muddy ground and its tail lashed in its death throes. Sorry Sid stood his ground and emptied his six-shooter. Every shot hit the dead lion, and he kept snapping the hammer on the empty gun.

He threw away his fancy gun and ran towards the ketch dog. He had to jump over the lion's carcass. Then he was on the ground, holding the limp ketch dog in his arms, racked by terrible sobbing.

"Hell's fire!" Old Chiz said. "Kin you beat that!"

Old Chiz McEgan's voice was a croaking whisper. There came up in his throat a hard aching sort of lump and he kept swallowing.

Then Old Chiz looked beyond and through the open gate that led into the tight wire trap. Out of the tail of his eye Chiz had sighted a sizable bunch of cattle there. The shooting had boogered them and they stampeded towards the far end of the trap. The ten-wire fence would stop them. Then they'd bunch.

Old Chiz's heart quickened. There stood the big Bremmer Bull in the gate of the trap pasture. Chiz forgot Sorry Sid and the ketch-dog in his arms. He flipped the loop down across his shoulders and swung it once to get the kinks out of the wet rope.

The big Brahma Bull was a renegade. He'd heard the crack of many a bull whip snapped across his nose to turn him. But he'd never yet turned. He'd heard the crackling explosion of a .45 six-shooter and had heard the whine of the bullet in front of his head. But the Brahma Bull had no fear of a gun. The crack of a six-shooter only infuriated him. A gun meant pain. He'd been stung once by a bullet on his hump.

The gun noise had riled him and he was on the prod. The bull was pawing the muddy ground, his cloven hoofs kicking it up in a muddy shower. He was shaking his head as if the shots had stung his hide and he was bawling weirdly. Then he lumbered into motion.

A Brahma Bull to all appearances looks clumsy. With his hump and loping gait he looks slow and awkward. But, actually he covers the ground fast. And nothing can stop a Brahma's charge when he's on the prod. He charges with his eyes open, his head high and his ungainly oversized dewlap swinging.

A Brahma can lower his head swiftly and a big bull can lift a two hundred pound man and toss him fifteen feet back over his head, whirl and be back on the luckless man before he lands. And he's apt to hook sideways to gore a man. Apt to tromp him, worry him with horns and sharp, cloven fore-hoofs. He's a man-killer.

Sorry Sid's back was towards the gate. His dog was in his arms, his head lowered into the bloody hair. He was sobbing and oblivious to everything else in his terrible grief. But the dog wasn't dead. The big, ugly, scarred, ragged-eared head moved and the yellow eyes opened. Brin began licking his own dog's blood from the tear-stained face of Sorry Sid.

The kid's sobs broke into a kind of hysterical laughing, sobbing noise. He looked up at the sound of pounding hoofs. He saw old Chiz spurring his horse, jumping the carcass of the dead lion. So close past they went that the horse kicked mud into his face. Old Chiz never gave him a glance. His teeth were bared in a flat, whiskered grin. His eyes were blue slits. His small loop was held high, looking round as a silver dollar.

He went past Sorry Sid so fast that the boy's blinking, tear-wet eyes had to look sharp to get the picture. And holding the big ketch-dog in his arms, as he squatted there on the ground, Sorry Sid's head turned quickly to watch.

THEN he saw it. The big Bremmer Bull charging. Charging him and his dog. The bull wasn't fifty feet away.

Then Chiz swung his horse and the loop swung out and went down over the bull's horns and jerked tight. Chiz and his horse were past the bull. Chiz had his weight in his left stirrup when the charging bull hit the end of the rope.

But the big bull was not thrown. Limber-necked, front legs braced, cloven hoofs dug deep in the wet ground, his hind quarters swung around. His eyes were a wicked red under the heavy wrinkled Brahma eyelids Sleepy looking eyes, wicked as sin and cunning with combat wisdom. Cheated of one victim, he turned to face another, more worthy of his big brute animal fury.

This was his natural enemy, a man on horseback. He stood head roped, his big hump swinging, his weight against the taut rope. He sized up the man on horseback as a prize fighter in the ring sizes up an opponent. The bull had been head roped before. Now it was sulled. Then slowly the bull slacked the taut rope. One sharp cloven hoof pawed the ground deep and flung the mud high. Then he charged.

Old Chiz and his top rope horse expected just that. No spurs were needed to put the cow pony clear. The horse watched. The Brahma bull went on, Chiz and his horse behind, so close that the flapping old chaps wing brushed the bull's rump. The rope flipped down and the slack went across the hind legs above the hock, tripping the hind legs as it tightened, twisting the roped head around on the limber short neck.

The Brahma Bull went down on its side. The horse dug in for the drag, straining every muscle, shod hoofs dug deep in the wet ground. The bull was dead weight. The ketch-rope was tied fast and the hard twist wet rope stretched. Chiz looked back across his shoulder, all his weight in his left stirrup.

"Heavy ox. . . ." Old Chiz snarled. "He'll snap the rope like it was thin thread . . . takes a wire cable . . ."

The Brahma Bull scrambled up when the rope slacked. Big as a bull elephant. Up on his feet and charging again.

"Got a whale on the end of a trout line. But if the twine don't bust . . ."

Like a fisherman playing a gamy trout, Chiz and his rope horse played the big Brahma Bull. Slobber strung like cobwebs from the bull's bawling mouth. The horse dripped sweat. Chiz's hat was yanked down at a jack-deuce angle on his grizzled head. Sweat trickled down into his gray whiskers. His slitted blue eyes were wary, his breathing hard and fast.

Sorry Sid was on his feet now. The dog in his arms was squirming and whining a deep-throated growl behind the whine. The ketch-dog's yellow eyes were watching the contest and he wanted to be in on it.

Chiz sighted Sorry Sid with a quick look. His voice bellowed loud and harsh and profane.

"You bug-eyed, slack-jawed dummy! Git aboard that mule. Don't stand flat flooted like a jersey waitin' for milkin' time! Step up on that mule. I ain't got till sundown!"

The ketch-dog squirmed loose from Sorry Sid's slack arms.

"Here dawg! Here Brin!"

Sorry Sid was running toward the roan Strawberry mule. The mule had cautiously kicked free of the blocker loop and backed away from the rope. He stood there tracked, bridle reins hanging, ground-tied.

Sorry Sid gathered the reins and swung up in his saddle, gathering his ketch-rope. His hands were wet and slick with the ketch-dog's blood. He wiped them off on his chaps and coiled his rope with unsteady too-eager hands. The rope was wet and muddy and Sorry Sid's hands were all slick muddy thumbs. He was shaking and his heart was pounding against his ribs.

He tried to shake a loop in the muddy rope. The honda was fouled with mud so the rope wouldn't slide through and he had to dig the mud out of the brass honda. His rope was one of those ready-made ketch ropes from a mail order catalog and had the only brass honda in the cow country.

"Rope a horse in the corral," said Wag, "and that brass thing might knock a horse's eye out."

Sorry Sid's breath was coming in heaving sobs by the time he got the sticky mud out of the brass honda and then he had to pull the muddy rope through to build a loop.

"Hold back!" snarled old Chiz. "Hold back! Don't come up thataway. Wait back till he charges again! Then I'll swing him around. Then come up but don't come a-runnin'. Ease up along his rump and in behind. If you can't throw a rope, spread that loop in front of his hind laigs. And I'll drag him into it."

The Brahma Bull charged again, slobber stringing out behind him. Chiz let him hit the end of the rope as he passed, then swung his head around and dragged. But there was no drag to the angry, winded bull. He just sulled.

"Give that mule his head. He savvies. When I swing off at an angle, he's bound to untrack. Lay your loop on the ground. When he steps a hind foot in it, jerk your twine and go south!"

SORRY SID gigged his mule, slack reined. His loop was too big. The mule took him so close to the bull he could smell the hide. Then the bull was jerked sideways and around and Sorry Sid dropped his bug loop. The loop was still in his hand when the Brahma Bull stepped into it with both hind feet.

"Yank that rope!" Old Chiz creaked, loudly and dismally—hopelessly. "Heel 'im!"

Sorry Sid felt the loop jerked out of his hand. The mule jumped of its own accord and the rope tightened up above the bull's hocks. When the Strawberry roan mule hit the end of the rope, the jar almost threw Sorry Sid. He lost his right stirrup and grabbed the saddle horn. The mule dug in, his long ears flattened back, lunging with all his puny weight against the taut rope.

Sorry Sid cut a desperate look back across his shoulder. It looked as if the big Brahma Bull was stretching out.

But he was still on his feet.

"Git 'im, Brin!" Sorry Sid forgot his ketch-dog was hurt, mebby dead. He was in a tight. Chiz was in a tight. "Git 'im, dawg!"

Old Chiz McEgan groaned a hopeless, creaky groan. He'd seen that ketch-dog of Sorry Sid's in action. The dumb brindle mongrel didn't have good sense. He went loco. He'd swing onto a horse's tail, instead of tackling a steer.

Old Chiz saw the big blood-smeared brindle go past, growling deep. Saw him gather himself and spring, jaws wide, fangs bared. The ketch-dog was at the bull's head.

The dog leaped high and the bulldog jaws clamped down on the bull's nose, and hung there, big wide bulldog jaws clamped tight. The bull was bellowing and lifting its head and bawling crazily with pain. He swung the big ketch-dog off his feet and the dog hung by its teeth and swung back and forth, all four feet off the ground. The Brahma Bull swung himself off balance and went over on its side. The Strawberry mule jerked the slack tight and the bull's hind legs were stretched out behind.

Chiz's horse backed against the head rope. Old Chiz was off his horse and his hogging string gripped in his teeth. No cowboy contestant ever tied a critter's hind legs in faster time.

"Throw me your hoggin' string, Sid!"

It was the first time old Chiz had called him Sid without hanging a cuss word on it. And never, never in that tone of voice.

Sorry Sid tossed his hogging string to old Chiz. Chiz double-tied the big bull's hind legs and straightened up.

V

SORRY SID sat his mule. Torn between his cowhand's duty to old Chiz and his love for his dog. He was white-faced and his eyes were pain-seared.

He was staring at the Brin ketch-dog. Brin lay there stretched out and all over blood like dead. His jaws were still clamped on the bull's bleeding nose and the bull was bawling crazily and trying to shake the dog's teeth loose.

Sorry Sid swallowed the lump in his throat. And made his desperate plea. His voice hoarse and broken and sort of creaking like the voice of old Chiz.

"Kin I git down now, Chiz? Take a look at my ketch-dawg. . . . I think ol' Brin's dead."

"Hell's fire! Git down. Git down. But slack your rope first. Git it off the saddle horn."

Old Chiz slipped the brass honda loop over the bull's forelegs and half-hitched it and brought the rope back through his hind legs over the hogging string. He pulled until he had the four legs bunched and tied.

"Leggo, Brin . . . leggo your holt, ketch-dawg."

The dog's yellow eyes had a sort of greenish red glaze and he clamped his jaws.

"Fetch a hatful of water . . . He's dyin' . . . Please . . . please, God, don't let my dawg die."

Chiz fetched his battered hat full of water and let it spill slowly on the dog's bloody head. He limped back to the tank and got another hatful, and let it trickle slowly into the dog's clamped jaws and down his throat. The Brin dog gulped and swallowed and the glaze went out of his eyes.

"Leggo your holt, Brin dawg . . ."

The dog's yellow eyes looked up at Sorry Sid and his stub tail thumped. Sorry Sid got the bulldog's jaws pried apart and carried him to the edge of the tank.

Old Chiz slacked the head rope. The bull had quit bawling and lay on its side, blowing. Chiz splashed water on the bull's nose. He got the screw worm dope from its leather sack on his saddle and daubed the tarlike thick salve on the teeth bites.

"You put up a battle, Bremmer. Take 'er easy." Carrying the screw worm bottle he went to look at the dog.

"Lemme take a look at that ketch dawg of yourn. Head swole along one side of the jaw, where that lion slapped him. Them long claws raked the hide open along his ribs but so far as I kin tell there's nary a rib busted." Old Chiz bathed the long claw marks free of blood and smeared them with the screw worm dope.

The big Brin dog was on his feet now and lapping water from the tank. His yellow eyes were still wicked looking but the stumpy tail wagged as the dog drank.

Old Chiz looked at the big Brahma Bull.

"Couldn't a-spotted it better, boy. Right under the big hackberry tree. There should be some big ol' cotton lead-ropes in the cabin yonder. Fetch 'em here, Sid, and we'll git our Bremmer Bull tied up to the tree and them hoggin' strings off."

Old Chiz McEgan straightened up. He was grinning and there was a hard bright twinkle in his puckered sky-blue eyes.

"I couldn't ask fer a better team-tyin' pardner," he creaked.

He wiped the blood and dirt and screw worm dope off his right hand onto his old chaps and held it out toward Sorry Sid.

"I'm shore proud to take it all back—all the cussin' out I poured on you, Sid. Standin' flat-footed and killin' that lion. It taken more nerve than old Chiz McEgan ever had."

A red flush flooded Sorry Sid's freckled face. He was swallowing so hard his Adam's apple bobbed up and down like a jumping jack.

"I—I don't actually remember. Heelin' that bull was a shore accident."

But he rubbed his right hand and old Chiz gripped it.

Maybe old Chiz's hand-grip was too hard. Because Sorry Sid's brown eyes sprang a leak and he blinked hard.

"Well, you find them lead ropes while I water my pony."

The big Brin ketch-dog watched them, stumpy tail wagging. Then the dog limped over to take a look at the tied Brahma Bull.

"Kin you beat that?" chuckled Old Chiz. "Hell's fire, there's a ketch-dawg! He finally ketched on how to tackle a wild ox. Goin' over to take a look at what he ketched."

It took the better part of an hour to get the big Brahma bull tied up to the trunk of the hackberry tree.

Old Chiz and Sorry Sid squatted on their hunkers and rolled a smoke.

"Looks like all the fight' drug out of the big Bremmer. Looks like a kid on a stick horse kin lead 'im back to the Cross T Bremmer ranch. Me'n you'll split that hundred. And we're buyin' that lion-tacklin' ketch dawg a shore big brass spiked collar with his Brin name on it."

He took out his jackknife and opened the long sharp blade and stropped it along his chaps.

"There's a big bounty on lions. Mebbyso a hundred bucks when you turn the pelt in. We might as well git it skinned."

"If it's all right with you, Chiz—" Sorry Sid's face was flushed and he was stuttering badly—"I'd like to have that lion hide Injun-tanned. I'd like—like—like to give it to your daughter Bonnie!" he blurted it out in a dismal creak.

OLD CHIZ all but choked as he bit off a corner of plug tobacco. He nodded and coughed and spat tobacco juice.

"That's . . . Now, Sid, you can't go throwin' that lion bounty money away. Tell you what we'll do. Take the pelt in and collect the bounty. All they need is proof you shot the lion. Then we'll have it Injun-tanned. Bonnie will shore be prideful. Wouldn't su'prize me if she didn't bust right down and g. to bawlin'.

"First time any feller ever give her a present. Bonnie ain't much fer good looks. Kinda shy-like and bashful and awkward you might say. Last time me'n her maw taken her to a dance, she jest set there on the bench all night. You was the only feller ever asked her to dance and doggoned if I didn't git blowed up and tell the missus not to let Bonnie dance with you.

"A man kin shore take his orneriness out on them as don't deserve it. Ridin' back home in the rig with the missus, Bonnie bawled all the way. Said she was nothin' but a wallflower and swore she'd never go to another dance. Bonnie's kinda plain and homely, but she's the best cook and housekeeper in the cow country. Man, she'll be shore tickled with that ol' lion-hide fer a rug."

"Bonnie is shore purty!" Sorry Sid blurted out.

"But you gotta look deep," said old Chiz. "Now that I come to think of it, Bonnie figgers you cut a shore handsome figger, a-foot or a-horseback. Only time she ever flared up. And the missus backed her play. It just struck me, Sid, you're two of a kind. Like a couple of wind-bellied mammyless calves at a roundup. . . . Hell's fire. . . . Yep."

Wag and his Hourglass cowhands were at camp on the Cibicue, filling their plates from Dutch ovens for an early noon dinner. Wag had his plate piled and his tin cup brimful of strong,

steaming black coffee when he heard somebody ride up. He looked up from under his hatbrim and his plate slid sideways dumping the grub on the ground, the black coffee spilling down his chaps.

"Do you see, boys," Wag said in an awed tone, "what I'm a-lookin' at?"

He was looking at Old Chiz on his horse and Sorry Sid on the Strawberry mule. They pulled up a little way off and Sorry Sid set the big ketch-dog down on the ground so that the dog could come into camp on his own legs. Tied on back of old Chiz McEgan's saddle was the rolled up lion hide.

"Pull the slack up in that jaw of yourn, Wag!" creaked Chiz. "Directly we git the wrinkles outa our innards, I'll spill you a yarn that'll curl what hair you got left on that bald skull. How me'n my team-tyin' pardner Sid, roped, throwed and hogtied the Bremmer Bull at Hackberry Springs, and left the Bremmer tied to a big hackberry saplin' fer to be led home, plumb gentled, by them Cross T gentle Annie cowhands. But we'd never a-got the job done without Brin, the best ketch-dawg in the wide cow country.

"Fu'thermore, when I rode up to Hackberry Springs, the fog lifted and there was the boy, Sorry Sid, standin' flat footed and the biggest lion ever lived, crouchin' there over the burro he'd just killed. Brin charged him and the lion slapped him fer a twenty foot distance, knocking him cold.

"There stood Sid, with that pearl-handled fancy gun in his hand. And he cut loose. Shot that lion square in the mouth and the lion leaped straight at the boy. Sid shot him again before he landed. It was a true shot, misters. And the boy never un-tracked. Just kept on shootin'. And when the lion landed he was so close Sid coulda spit on him. That's no windy I'm a-spillin.' And I'll whup the man who says so." Old Chiz's squinted blue eyes glared.

"We're shore proud, Chiz, to take your word for it," spoke Wag.

"How you fixed fer big T bone steaks?" Chiz snarled at the roundup cook. "You feed 'em all to the Brin ketch-dawg, hear me?"

"Quit runnin' off at the head," grinned Wag. "And light. Turn your horses loose."

"We ain't got long to linger," said old Chiz. "We got to git home to Brushy Basin. You better make out Sid's time and git yourse'f another windmill tender. Sid's throwed in with me. I'm givin' him a half interest in that greasy sack outfit of mine. The U2."

That was news to Sorry Sid and it left him dazed, grinning an uncertain lopsided grin.

Then they filled their plates and tin cups and squatted around on their hunkers, while Chiz McEgan told it scarey. Wag and the rest of the outfit let the grub on their plates get cold. And now and then Chiz would feed the Brin ketch-dawg between them, a raw T bone steak.

Old Chiz spoke pridefully, as if Sorry Sid was kinfolks and his own son. And Sorry Sid never tasted the grub he washed down with strong black roundup coffee. His face was red as an Injun blanket but never, never in his wildest, most wishful, dreams had he ever thought he would attain all this.

WHEN old Chiz had run down there was a sort of hush.

"I notice you two pardners has swapped chaps, Sid." Wag broke the silence.

"Chiz gimme boot. He gimme that ketch-rope he snared the Bremmer Bull with. Made me throw away that brass honda well rope. Said it might knock out a horse's eye. Chiz is stakin' me to a string of cow ponies. But I'd like to swap you out of the Strawberry mule, Wag."

"The Strawberry mule is all yourn," said Wag. "Take him home with you. Compliments of the Hourglass."

When they rode off together, Sorry Sid leaned down and lifted the Brin dog up and carried him in his arms.

The whole outfit watched them ride off together. Sort of tight throated.

"Don't forget, Chiz," called Wag. "Let us know in time!"

"I'll let you know in plenty time." Old Chiz grinned back across his shoulder.

"In time for what, Chiz?"

"The weddin', son. Yourn and Bonnie's."

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Next Issue: SEVEN-UP'S CHRISTMAS, by CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

ain't Science Wonderful?

Cousin Eif chases the rainbow's pot of gold only to find that you can't trust a woman!

by HARRY L. KIDD, Jr.

I SEE by the paper here," Cousin Idy said, "how a professor up in Ioway has done managed to cross up some bugs in a glass jar and turn a butterfly into a kinda long-tongued bee! Taken him thirty years—but he done it! Ain't science wonderful, Eif?"

She wrinkled up her nose at Cousin Eif, and he looked just the least bit sour at first. But after a minute he had the grace to grin.

"Hook the rowels to me if you got to, Idy—I ain't goin' to argue with you. Shoot fire—ary woman can turn a grasshopper into a ant inside of ten minutes like you done has got a right to laugh at them there thirty-year labbatory mavericks!"

Sho now, Cousin Eif, he knowed! Because if ever they was a human grasshopper, Eif Tetlow was it in his younger days. They wasn't a East Texas boy

from Elm Fork to Keechi done less work or got more of a kick out of livin', for a time anyway.

In fact the only thing ever give him any trouble at all whilst he was comin' up was a little hitch he done with Uncle Sam. Even then he never strained himself, for he come back from the First World War without ary scratch, slick and fat as a pen-fed shote.

He kissed Aunty Bess and shook hands with Uncle Tolly and then he went in the back room and unlimbered his old guitar and begun tunin' her up. And all he done the next three-four months was just set around, knocking out a chord or two once in awhile and lettin' the world rock itself along. It kind of worried Uncle Tolly.

"How come you don't git about a little more, son? You sho can't just set on that there bench forevermore, can you?" he wanted to know, after a couple months done slipped past.

"I ain't rightly positive," Eif told him. "I got three years' relaxing to ketch up on, Daddy. That there army life is plumb wearyin' on a man's nerves. But I'll likely git about some pretty soon."

UNCLE TOLLY needn't of fashed himself. Because after Eif rested up for another six-eight weeks he started makin' the rounds up and down the bottoms with his hound-dogs, or stayin' out all night at one schoolhouse dance or the other, or chasin' plumb acrost the county after some girl he'd got on the string. Anything at all but work. Far as work was concerned Eif figured bottomland farmin' was a right rough life and he aimed to keep his back turned on the cotton patch.

Still, he knowed he couldn't keep on just havin' fun for always and eat regular at Uncle Tolly's table. So he taken a lot of time up trying to figure out some way of gettin' by without puttin' out much effort. He figured and he figured but it wasn't no dice at first. But finally he come up with what looked like a real good idea. He knowed he was young and good-looking and he decided there wasn't no reason why he hadn't ought to pick out some well-to-do girl and marry her and settle the thing once and for all.

He was so right down pleased, once he got it all hammered out, that he couldn't help blowin' a little to his sister Bee.

"It's sho Lord foolproof, Bee," he told her. "Shoot fire—it's bound to be a lot easier to set up clost to a rich girl than it is to a poor one!"

"I wouldn't know," Bee said, kind of snippy. "I ain't never noticed none of my boy friends hangin' back lookin' for a dollar mark! Still, maybe you got somethin'. Who you picked out?"

"Well, I ain't yet made up my mind," Eif said. "They's Dessie Friday. Old Man Will's got half this county in his britches pocket, seems like. Only thing is Dess ain't right in the head more'n one day out of six. A man'd sho have a time tryin' to pleasure himself with Dess, now wouldn't he?"

Bee faunched her eyes at him and grinned a little.

"Ain't you askin' a little too much out of this thing, Eif? Maybe you'd like Sally Kinsey better?"

"Lordy no! I grant you Sal's a plumb smart girl even if she is a mite spraddle-legged. And Old Man Lawrence Kinsey's got himself five good gins and a couple warehouses besides. But they's just too many ways to split the profits, seein' he's got nine more girls to marry off!"

Eif looked real worried-like for a minute or two. But pretty soon his face cleared up.

"Sue Markham's bound to be the lucky girl, Bee," he told her. "She can't miss—she ain't got no brothers nor sisters. And Old Man Gene owns that there big store free and clear and they sho Lord ain't much work in storekeeping! How come I never thought about Sue till now I don't know."

"Well I do!" Bee snapped at him, losing her temper a little. "It's because you been spendin' all yore free time with Idy Roberts up to now. You ain't got a grain of common sense in yore head, Eif Tetlow, settin' here talkin' foolishness like this! How's Idy goin' to feel if you go and marry Sue Markham? That ain't no way to treat a nice girl like Idy!"

Eif just laughed. "Pore old Idy," he said. "I plumb forgot she was a friend of yourn, Bee. She's just plain due to be left in the pasture is all! Old Man Amos Roberts is land poor in the first place and he's a bull-skinner for work in the second. Ain't you noticed the way he keeps Tom and Dan's noses in a furrow six days a week?"

"I've noticed them boys both earns their places at the table!" Bee come back at him. "What on this green earth

has got into you, Eif? Idy's a nice, sweet, good-lookin' girl and she really thinks a lot of you. What more can you want than that?"

"Cash money!" Eif told her, grinnin' to see how mad she was. "It's too bad, Bee—in a way. Old Idy's a warm-natured girl all right and I can fair use some heatin' after them last three or four cold winters I done spent. But I reckon Old Man Gene Markham's pot-belly stove'll be warm enough to tend to my wantin's in case Sue falls down on the job!"

Bee got up and flounced in the house and slammed the door. And Eif he set there on the bench laughing, not even realizing he had done made his fatal mistake. Iffen he'd only of stopped to think, he'd of knowed that while blood's thicker than water in lots of places, it sho Lord ain't in East Texas—leastways so far as womenfolks is concerned.

And right enough, it wasn't more'n a day or two till Bee and Idy got together and Bee get het up and told Idy the whole thing. Idy she was all upset at first, but then she got mad and she allowed there wasn't no living man could treat her thataway and not pay the price. And more'n that, she said straight out she wanted Eif and she aimed to have him. And if it was money he was lookin' for well she'd really give him somethin' to wall his eyes at and no sorry general store neither!

SO HER and Bee they laid their plans. Inside lessen a week here come Bee one evening, scootin' over to Old Man Amos Roberts' place to tell Idy that Eif was aimin' to take his rifle early next morning and make a little sashay down the Navasot after some squirrels.

Poor old Eif. The way them girls done him was a caution! There he was about eight o'clock the next morning layin' in back of a big water-oak with two or three squirrels already in his coat when he heard somebody talkin'. Here come Bee and Idy walkin' down the trail along the edge of the river, chinnin' their heads off. Course, they let on like they wasn't nobody in forty miles. But both of them knowed well enough where Eif was at, seein' they hadn't been more'n twenty yards behind him ever since he left the house.

So them two she-devils just strolled on down by the water-oak and set down on the edge of the bank. And just about the time Eif was gettin' ready to jump up and surprise them, well, he flopped right back down again. Because the girls all of a sudden up and pulled their clothes off over their heads and jumped in the water buck-naked.

Well, Eif he just layed there with his eyes stickin' out on stems. And the girls they played around there in the water for a few minutes as innocent as a couple of she-bullfrogs frolickin' on a summer day. After a while, though, they clum back out on the bank and pulled on their shimmies and set down with their backs against the knobby roots on the big oak, still talkin'.

It was the first chance Eif had to hear what they was talkin' about. And when he got it good and through his head, his eyes sunk back in and his ears must of riz up half a foot. Because it begun to look like he could maybe have his cake and eat it too if he played his hand clost enough to his vest. The girls was talkin' kind of low and it seemed like Bee was beggin' Idy to see things her way.

"Honey," she was tellin' Idy, "you go on and tell Eif about that there paper. He'd sho rather marry you than anybody else, I know that. Only he just plain don't aim to work for a livin'!"

"No—I ain't ever goin' to have ary man I marry sayin' he wed me for my money, Bee. Lord knows I'm crazy about Eif. But he ain't never goin' to know about them old Tehuacana diggings bein' located down in our Elm Fork section."

"Somebody's bound to find out sooner or later, Idy. Why not Eif?" Bee asked her.

"I doubt if anybody does," Idy said. "I just run acrost that there paper by pure accident, up in the back of great-uncle Tom's chest of drawers. I ain't even told my daddy, or Tommy or Dan neither. And I ain't goin' to!"

"How come, honey? Sho now—you want to be rich, don't you?"

"Bee, money is a curse, like it says in the Bible," Idy told her, real serious. "If I can't have Eif, I don't want the money. And if it takes the money to git Eif, I don't want neither one. Them diggings can stay in under that there old mesquite root till hell freezes over, for all of me!"

"Well, I know just how you feel," Bee said. "I'd right down love to see you and

Eif married up and happy. But there won't a soul on this green earth git so much as a cheep out of me, if that's the way you want it. Us women got to stick together in a deal like this one."

They set there a minute, not sayin' a thing. Then they got up and finished dressing and went on back up the trail the way they come. Old Eif, he like to died, just thinking about what he'd heard. Because there wasn't nobody in East Texas wouldn't of give his very eyeteeth to have a chance at locatin' that old Tehuacana mine.

Folks that's heard the old-timers talk about it say they's more gold nuggets in the Tehuacana digging than ticks on a cowdog! And plenty of city fellers from over to Austin or up to Dallas, or even from as far away as Tulsa, Oklahoma, had been pokin' and blastin' all over the Navasot bottoms ever since anybody could remember. Nobody hadn't found a thing, but now they was this here paper Idy was talking about, and Eif figured things was due for a sudden change.

And, like you might figure, Eif had a plump rapid turn of heart, too, almost overnight. He dropped poor Sue Markham cold, and begun to cut down on Idy again. And he really courted her high, wide, and handsome. Naturally he never said a livin' word about hearin' her and Bee talkin'. Because he was on to that stubborn-minded Roberts breed pretty well. And he figured Idy'd likely tell him to ketch his saddle and pull his freight out of there if he so much as breathed Tehuacana mine paper.

WHICH was just the way Idy'd planned things to go. All she wanted was Eif, and what little struggle she give him after he really got down to courtin' her serious didn't amount to no more than a good drink of whisky in a blue norther. And first thing anybody knowed, here Old Man Amos was goin' around in the county invitin' all the folks up to the house for the weddin'.

Night before they was due to tie the knot, Old Man Amos and his boys, Tom and Dan, got Eif in the back room and the Old Man fetched out his best drinkin' likker and they started in on a few little rounds—just kind of kickin' the frost out. Old Man Amos was feelin' pretty snuffy and after awhile he hit Eif a lick acrost the shoulder.

"Son," he said, winkin' at Tom and Dan, "I hear tell you ain't much of a hand for farm work. But ne'mind—my Idy'll break you to the plow quicker than fire kin scorch a duck!"

Eif he grinned, but he didn't say much. He figured if he only give Old Man Amos enough rope he'd sure hang hisself in a hurry. The old man, he took another snort or two and then he set in to break his news.

"I allus aim to make things easy on a young couple as I kin," he told Eif. "When the boys here got tied up, I give each one his pick of a half-section. And I aim to do the same by you and Idy. Only thing, they ain't much left to choose from. All I got is the homeplace here and that Elm Fork Creek section."

"God knows you ain't givin' Eif nothin' in that sorry Elm Fork land, Pa," Tom said. "Why don't you just go on and tell him we'll throw him up a house down on the bottom half of the homeplace here, and quit dewlappin' yourself with a dull razor!"

Old Man Amos give Tom a mean glance, but Eif never give him a second to git off the hook.

"That is sho Lord a fine weddin' gift, Mister Amos," he said, tryin' to keep his voice from shaking, he was that tickled. "But I reckon I druther have the east half of the Elm Fork section. I aim to put me up a place on the bluffs just up from the creek, right over them pretty mesquite flats!"

Lordamercy, Old Man Amos and Tom and Dan, all three, like to dropped dead.

"You're ten times longer on guts than you are on brains, Eif," Dan told him when he got so he could say anything. "What you aim to do with all them sorry mesquites—chop 'em up for fodder?"

"Heck yes, Eif—that there land's worthless as a three-card flush!" Tom downed a tumberful neat to kind of ease the jolt and faunched his eyes around at the old man. "Let's us git this here boy bedded down for the night, Pa," he said. "He ain't in no condition to make up his mind now. Idy and good likker together has got his mind whirlin' like a tumbleweed in a cyclone!"

But Eif never paid them a bit of mind. They argued around with him for half the night, and he never budged. They went and drug Idy out of bed to make her help, but she never done them a lick of good. Because all she'd do was look

like the cat that swallowed the sour cream, and let on whatever Eif wanted was good enough for her.

So finally they give up. And while Eif and Idy was on their weddin' trip, Old Man Amos and the boys throwed them up a good house, right where Eif said he wanted it. They lined up some fences and run up about twenty head of stock and slapped Eif's E-Cross-T on their flanks and hazed them over on the half-section. And then they fixed up a couple sheds and put a few working tools around and called it a day. Old Man Amos was chompin' on the bit at how everybody was laughin' at the sorry land Eif had done picked out, and he figured he'd sho Lord let him scratch gravel for awhile.

And Eif he really scratched, too! For if he never learnt nothin' else whilst he was honeymooning, he learnt Idy was one more strong-minded woman. And he didn't dare let her find out he'd married her on account of she knew where the Tehuacana mine shaft was located.

So first thing he done after they come back was to get out them tools and put in a full crop on the good land that was in his half-section. He wanted to get everybody's mind off of him and his chunk of mesquites, and give himself time to figure out his plans. He worked mighty hard, and it plumb surprised folks to watch old Eif laborin' like a pack-mule in the hot sun, goin' up and down the furrows.

BUT work or no work, Eif Tetlow was one more happy man. Every time he thought about that Tehuacana mine his spirits'd crawl up a notch or so and he'd start to whistlin' and singin' and raunchin' around like a he-mockingbird on a moonlight night.

He was plain dying to ask Idy about the paper and make things easy on himself. But he was scared to open his mouth about it, lessen she'd get mad and tear it up or chunk the stove with it just for spite. Every time she'd go off the place he like to tore the house apart searchin' for it. But no dice—he never could find it at all. Which wasn't too unusual, seein' Idy'd made the whole thing up out of thin air and frog sweat, so as to speak.

It fair grassed Eif not to find it, though. But he sho Lord had plenty of sand. For when he found he just couldn't locate it, no matter how he tried, he set his teeth together and got his pickaxe and a team and went out and started grubbin' up mesquites.

Sho—everybody knows what that kind of work's like! Some of them old roots goes down Lord knows how far and some of them just runs along under the ground, like a rattler headed for a dog-hole. The first tree Eif grubbed up was just a little bitty one, but it took him the better part of half a day. When he got done he straightened up and rubbed his back. Then he clum up on the bluff and looked down on mighty near a hundred and sixty acres of them things.

"I be a dog if I ain't cut myself out a right smart sweatin' spell," he told himself, feelin' a mite low in his mind.

Well, that wasn't no lie. Because he didn't hardly dare to go on diggin' on them trees all the time, or folks'd ketch on there was more to them flats than a man might think.

So Eif kept on puttin' in one crop after another and doin' the best job he could on every one of them, too, so's he could keep Old Man Amos and the boys from being over at his place all the time to tell him where he was makin' mistakes. And ary spare minute come his way, Eif'd grab a saw and a team and a pickaxe and go after them mesquites again.

Dog if he didn't fool around that way for right around ten years. And by that time he had grubbed up mighty near ninety acres of them trees and hauled the stumps off and put the land in crops to make it look reasonable. And still he hadn't hit no Tehuacana mine shaft.

It was a little hard to take, but Eif figured he couldn't lose and even if he was due to be a mite older when he got his money than he'd thought he'd be, well, he'd still be young enough to have a high old good time with it.

But right along about then Old Man Amos up and died. And Eif and the two boys got together up at the homeplace to split up the land that was left.

"This here homeplace is the best land in the old Roberts survey," Tom said. "Only I be dog if Eif ain't got near as good a place now—what they is of it. You know, Eif, I never figured you had that much a farmin' streak in you, to tell you the truth!"

"Me neither, Tom," Eif told him, and that was gospel.

So they set down and started tryin' to divide the land up and pretty soon Tom got the idea maybe him and Dan could put the irons to Eif a little, seein' they'd both come to thinkin' he was simple, the way he kept grubbin' up stumps in his spare time.

"Looky here, Eif," Tom told him. "How come you don't give up Idy's claim in the homeplace for that half-section of mine and Dan's that joins onto your place on the far side of the creek? It's real good land, and they ain't but just the one little patch of mesquites on it."

Well, Eif like to jumped out of his skin. Because in all them years he never had took the trouble to cross over the Elm Fork, and he hadn't knowed there was another patch of mesquites in the whole Elm Fork Bottoms. His heart dropped plumb through his boot-soles at the idea of grubbin' up another half-section of stumps. But he was right stubborn himself, and he figured he'd gone so far they wasn't no turnin' back.

"All right," he said, "I'll trade you sight unseen. Seems like I kind of got mesquites in my blood! How big a patch is it?"

"Aw, not so big—maybe five acres at the outside," Tom told him.

That made Eif feel a little better. After they got things settled, he took off acrost the creek and looked over his new holdings till he found the little patch of mesquites.

"Maybe these is the ones in Idy's paper instead of them on my old place," he thought. "I reckon I'll take off and get at 'em right away."

IT KIND of fired him up to think about it, and he cleaned up that little five acre patch in mighty near no time. Only it wasn't no dice there neither. And after he got done, he figured maybe Tom and Dan had sold him a pup, all right. But then he got to thinkin' he might of felt worse if he'd let it go by.

So he just passed it off and rented the whole half-section to Lud Fockes and went on back to his own place and put in another crop and got to grubbin' on seventy acres of trees he had left.

And he would likely have got through them in another seven-eight years, too, seein' his boys was gettin' big enough to be quite a help to him. Only Lud hadn't no more despair than to up and die after he'd been rentin' for a couple of years. And times bein' a mite better'n tolerable, Eif couldn't find another renter. So he had to go and put in a crop on both places so's wouldn't nobody get to wonderin' how come he'd let good land stand idle whilst he grubbed up mesquites. And it like to took up all his strength keepin' both places running.

Well, what with one thing and another, it run out mighty near twenty years after he got married that Eif finally seen the end in view. He had done grubbed up every single tree in the Elm Fork bottoms but one, and when he got that one topped out, he knowed he'd won. Because there wasn't no other place for that there Tehuacana mine shaft to be.

So Eif took a day off and went over to Austin. And when he come back he had a city feller along with him. The city feller was kind of short and he had a little bristly mustache and a leather arm-satchel and real shiny shoes. When he come ridin' in with Eif, Idy was right down surprised. She called Eif out back right off, to find out what was up.

"Who's that you drug home with you, Eif?" she wanted to know. "Y'all look like a couple tomcats with a fresh jug of milk! Now what on earth are you figurin' on?"

"I aim to make my fortune at last, Idy," Eif told her, not much carin' how she took it, now he had the money mighty near in his hand. "That feller's the lawyer I'm goin' to need to pertect my rights in the Tehuacana diggings. Which same I figure I'll strike early in the mornin'!"

Idy, she looked at him real hard and she seen he was in earnest. At first she started to laugh, but then she figured she better not. So she never said nothin'.

Next morning Eif and the lawyer went down on the Elm Fork. The boys rounded up a couple of teams and come down and hitched some chains around the butt of the stump.

Eif he stood there a second, just tasting the glory. Then he raised up his arm and give the signal, and the mules give a good stout pull or two, and up she come. Everybody run forward to look in the hole—and they wasn't nothin' there!

Poor Eif—he never knowed which way to turn. Here he had single-handed, mighty near, grubbed up every mesquite

tree in the Elm Fork bottoms and there wasn't no gold mine shaft under ary one of them. So he sent one of the boys to drive the lawyer back to Austin and he went and set down on the stoop and rested himself good for the first time in twenty years and started to wonderin' just how he'd got his tail caught in the fence. After awhile he brung the front legs of his chair down with a bang and started hollerin' for Idy.

"Looky here, Idy," he said when she come out on the stoop. "In twenty years I ain't never mentioned this here matter to you. But now I want to know just where in the heck is that there paper you told sister Bee about down on the Navasot that day?"

Idy looked at him settin' there stewin' and she really did let go and laugh. She whooped and she hollered till she had to set down to rest herself.

"You sho Lord ain't hintin' you might of married me for my money, are you, Eif?" she asked him, cacklin' till the tears come in her eyes.

Well, it made Eif right down mad at first, once he seen he'd been slickered. But Idy she settled him down pretty quick. Because four children and twenty years hadn't made her no less strong-minded than when he married her.

"Looky here yourself, you old fool," she told Eif. "I don't mind tellin' you I done you a big favor, only you don't know it. Git yore mind offen that there gold and glance around you and tell me what you see!"

So Eif looked around, and he really seen plenty. He seen a full section of good bottom land, put to the plow and paying off regular, year after year. He seen a good house and good barns and sheds full of working tools. He seen a couple hundred head of fat cattle with E-Cross-T on their left hips. And he seen a wife that was still right good-lookin' after twenty years, and four nice healthy kids. So when he seen all that, he set right back down again.

"I be dog if you ain't right, Idy," he told her. "They ain't a gold mine in the country I'd trade out for! But I got to say one thing—I sho Lord ain't never goin' to trust another word you say. Why, you and Bee had lyin' figured to a science, that day!"

"So what if we did?" Idy said. "I never even halfway aimed for Sue Markham to take you or ary other man out from under my nose! Like the feller says, 'Science is wonderful!'"

And that was why Cousin Eif was lookin' a mite sour when Cousin Idy said them same words the other day. But that was six-eight weeks back. And now he's got his cotton crop out and made himself a nice chunk of money on it, he's feelin' faunchy as a maverick colt. Nothing sour about Cousin Eif today!

●

"No Mail Today!"

WE all know what it means not to receive mail. Sometimes it is a great disappointment, and at other times it doesn't seem to matter much. But to the earlier settlers of the West, the people located near Virginia City, Denver or Julesburg or Cheyenne, there was one sign they dreaded seeing in their local post office.

It was a sign that simply announced there would be no mail from the East that day. To the hardy citizens of the cow country that usually meant but one thing.

"Indians," one man would say in hushed tones to another as they read that sign. "The westbound stage won't ever arrive!"

The second man would just nod. There was no doubt in their minds that somewhere along the stage route were dead mules and arrow-pierced bodies beside the charred remains of the coach. The Indians had come and gone!

"Too bad," the first man might say. "I was expecting some important mail today. Guess it will never get here now."

"My brother was coming West to join me," the second man might answer. "He was due to arrive on the stage today. Guess he won't get here either."

That was what that sign, stating that there was no mail from the East today, meant to those early settlers. It was a sign of doom!

—Gerald Devers

HOCUS-POCUS
and no mistake

The Coyote County Sheriff finds that breaking six eggs in a derby hat is a good trick even if you don't do it!

A BOO BOO BOUNCE STORY
by BEN FRANK

I AM setting at the breakfast table, eating, when my wife comes in, and I say pleasant, "My dear, Blackrock the Mysterious put on a no little entertaining show at the opera house last night. Sometimes I wish—"

What should happen but she glares at me utmostly fierce.

"Hopewell, I know what you are wishing, and I don't like it! You are wishing you could hold a sheet in front of me and make me disappear like he made his blond assistant disappear."

"Why, my dear," I say, no little hurt, "I would not—"

"Also, I saw how you kept making

eyes at that blond hussy. Hopewell, I ought to never cook you another bite to eat!"

Not being one to argue, I reach for my hat, but she says, "Not so fast, Hopewell. I have a errand for you to do. I have made up my mind between the beads and the bracelet and will wear the beads to the Polecat Pilgrims Annual Basket-dinner and the Homecoming party tomorrow night. So you take back the bracelet to Nailhead Nutter's and this five dollars to pay for the beads. Tell him thank you for letting me have both articles to make up my mind about, and give him the money!"

"My dear," I say, taking both money and bracelet, which is very shiny silver with colored glass do-dads strung around and about on it, "you can always trust me with money, and—"

"Humph!" she says; and I walk out, thinking how it is that not even I, the deputy sheriff of Coyote County, U.S.A., is a hero to his own wife. Also, I give some thought to Blackrock the Mysterious and the numerous magic acts he did last night, including making his pretty blond assistant disappear. This indeed, and then some, would be a no little handy thing to be able to do where you are married to such as my dear wife.

On the way uptown, I see a poster tacked on a post, telling all about the Polecat Pilgrims Basket-dinner and Homecoming, which is a celebration in honor of the first settlers of Polecat and is the big society event of the year.

While I am reading thusly about the grand prize offered for the best amateur performance of the evening, I hear a rush of feet, and who should I see but Shoe-on Sorby running my way. This is no little astounding, for Shoe-on — so called because he is known to sleep at night with his shoes on—is never no hand to hurry.

"Hopewell," he pants, "on the way to town, a red-whiskered gent stepped out from behind a tree and robbed me of four dollars and eighteen cents!"

"No!" I say, feeling somewhat chill, for I recall other instances of late when various citizens have been held-up, and it is rumored that a very dangerous gent by the name of Holdup Harry is operating in Coyote County.

"Yes!" he says. "And I am on my way to tell yore big fat sheriff that he has got to do somethin' about it, or else!"

SHOE-ON races on toward the jail, and I think no little unhappy how the fat sheriff is none other than Boo Boo Bounce, my boss, and that he will be displeased to learn of Shoe-on's report, Boo Boo having no liking to stir about looking for criminals if he can keep from it.

Utmostly worried, I walk on and stop at the post office, where at I find a letter for Boo Boo. By the time I reach the jail office, Shoe-on has left, and Boo Boo Bounce is setting alone in his easy chair and scowling fierce and twiddling his fat thumbs no little energetic.

"It is about time yuh showed up, Deputy," he says.

"I stopped to get the mail," I say, giving him the letter.

He glares at the letter and sticks it into a desk drawer.

"I have got no time for letters this morning. Also, I am fed up with this sheriff business. Trouble, trouble, trouble! Hopewell, I am about to change my way of life."

That is when I notice there are six eggs in a neat row on his desk. Also, there is a small round stick some ten inches long. He picks up the stick and wags it at me.

"Deputy," he says, "I am about to perform a feat which I seen Blackrock the Mysterious perform last night."

"The trick where he busted eggs into a hat and pulled out a live chicken?" I ask.

"The very same. It is like this, Hopewell. Tomorrow night at the Polecat Pilgrims Basket-dinner and Homecoming, I will do this feat of magic and thus win the grand prize. Now, I do not care nothing for the silver loving cup, but," —and a crafty look comes to his fat face, "amongst those present will be Widow Gertrude Gollygee from Boston. As yuh recall, she was a Polecatter who married a rich Easterner who died and left her a million or so. I wish utmostly to make a no little strong impression on Mrs. Gollygee. Ever since Holdup Harry has commenced operating in Coyote County, it has occurred to me that there is a easier way to make a living than by being sheriff."

"You mean you'd marry Widow Gollygee?"

"Exactly. How-some-ever, first I must impress upon her that I am a man of cleverness and no little brain power.

Therefore, the egg trick. And that is why I have been waiting for you to come. Kindly hand me yore hat, Hopewell."

I have a sudden faint feeling, for I do not wish to have eggs busted in my hat, which is the only one I have.

"Boo Boo," I say, "are you shore you can turn eggs into—"

"Nothing to it, Hopewell. I listened utmostly close last night and have got the words Blackrock the Mysterious said down to a T. They are, 'Hocus pocus, razzle dazzle, dilly dum.' Then you wave a stick over the hat, and out jumps a chicken."

"But," I say, "mebbe there is more to it than the words?"

"That is what I wish to find out. Hand me yore hat."

"Boo Boo," I say, thinking fast, "Blackrock the Mysterious used a derby, not a old Stetson like mine."

Boo Boo frowns deep. "I never thought of that, Hopewell. A derby—but where at can I get a derby?"

"Mayor Mincemeat Malone wears a derby."

Boo Boo is of a sudden all smiles. "So he does, Hopewell. Kindly step over to the mayor's office and borrow his derby."

I do not like the idea no way you look at it, but I am not one to disagree with Boo Boo. So I head for the mayor's office.

On the way, who should I meet but old man Bundy, editor of the Polecat *News*, and a gent who dislikes me and Boo Boo heartily, us belonging to a different political party than he.

"I hear there has been another robbery in Coyote County," he says, giving me a nasty look. "What are you and Boo Boo going to do about it? Nothing, as usual?"

"Mr. Bundy," I say indignant, "leave us never forget that the Law of Coyote County always gets their man."

"Ha, ha!" he laughs very loud, which I ignore and go on.

MAYOR Mincemeat Malone is setting behind his desk, a scowl on his bony face. His derby being on his head, I cannot think of no way to get it off and over to the jail office without taking him along. So I say, "Mayor, Boo Boo would like to see you."

"Hopewell, I too wish to see Boo Boo. It has come to my attention that last night at the magic show, numerous pocketbooks disappeared. On thinking it over, I have come to the conclusion that Blackrock the Mysterious' pretty blond assistant might of snitched them when she was doing the mind-reading act."

We walk over to the jail office not talking, and go in.

"Boo Boo," Mincemeat says, "I have a crow to pick." And he goes on to tell who all reported lost pocketbooks and that Boo Boo should ought to run down Blackrock and have a talk with him. Then he sees the eggs and blinks rapid.

"Settin' a hen?" he asks.

Boo Boo smiles innocent. "Kindly have off yore hat, Mayor, and set down. Deputy, take the mayor's hat."

I get the derby with a slight tug and set it on the desk. Boo Boo takes a egg in his fat fingers, breaks it and drops it very neat into the derby.

"Hey!" Mincemeat yips, starting to his feet; but I put both hands on his bony shoulders and push him back in the chair.

"Leave us be calm," I say fatherly.

Boo Boo breaks a second egg into the derby, and I see that Mincemeat's face is somewhat red. By the time Boo Boo has broke the sixth egg, the mayor's face has a purplish cast, and he can no longer swear nor sputter.

Boo Boo picks up the stick and waves it over the derby very confident. "Hocus pocus, razzle dazzle, dilly dum!"

He looks into the derby, and his face grows somewhat pale, while his three chins quiver no little violent. I also look into the hat and see a very sad mess of eggs and shells.

"Something must of went wrong," Boo Boo murmurs.

That is when Mayor Mincemeat Malone says a very harsh word, picks up the derby like it was a bucket of milk, and very careful not to spill any, puts it on Boo Boo's bald head and pulls it clear down to his big red ears.

"Boo Boo," Mincemeat roars, "if I don't get my hat back as clean as a new pair of pants, an' if yuh don't do somethin' about this pickpocket business, I'll —I'll—"

He is so mad he cannot think of anything bad enough to say, so he walks out of the office and slams the door terrific.

Boo Boo pries off the derby and looks

at me out of sad eyes through a very gooey mess of busted eggs.

"Deputy," he says, "there is nothing to do but run down Blackrock the Mysterious. From him I must learn how to do this trick and also inquire about the lost pocketbooks."

"It should ought to be no little trouble to find him," I say, "for he is on his way to Dry Springs to put on a show."

Boo Boo hands me the derby. "First, how-some-ever, kindly clean up the mayor's hat and dry it out. He seemed no little irritated about the trick not working."

By the time I have the derby fit to wear, it is noon.

"Leave us drop over to Stinky Joe's and eat our dinners before starting in quest of Blackrock the Mysterious," Boo Boo says.

This we do, and I return the mayor's hat to his office when I see him leave bareheaded to go home for dinner.

AFTER we have et and have bought six eggs from Stinky Joe, we saddle up and ride westward along the trail to Dry Springs. Late in the afternoon, we come to Skunk Creek where there is numerous shady cottonwoods, under which we observe Blackrock's covered wagon and team eating grass and Blackrock hisself setting by a fire, cooking. We are no little glad to find him without having to go clear to Dry Springs.

"Greetings, friend," Boo Boo says pleasant. "Thought yuh was puttin' on a show in Dry Springs tonight?"

Blackrock scrubs a long-fingered hand across his long, thin face and looks up at us out of sunk-in, dark eyes.

"My assistant has took sick," he says mournful.

Boo Boo says that is a shame, and no mistake, and would he kindly do the egg and derby trick as he, Boo Boo, hopes to learn how it is did in order to do it at the Polecat Pilgrims Basket-dinner and Homecoming party tomorrow night.

Blackrock shakes his head sad. "I ain't got no eggs."

I hold up the sack of eggs we bought from Stinky Joe.

"I am in no mood to do magic feats," Blackrock says.

Boo Boo scowls heavy. "Friend, there is a matter of some pocketbooks missing last night, and it has been suggested that I question you about the same."

"I am no thief!" Blackrock says harsh.

"None the less," Boo Boo says hard, "should yuh not care to show me the egg trick, I must search yore outfit from A to Z."

"I would not like that," Blackrock mutters. "Not with my poor assistant sick in bed in my covered wagon."

He gets to his feet, goes to his wagon and returns with a small table with a black cover and a derby hat. "Set down, gentlemen," he says, "and watch me closely."

We do. He puts the hat on the table, breaks the eggs into it, and says, "Hocus pocus, razzle dazzle, dilly dumdee!" He reaches into the hat and pulls out a live chicken.

Boo Boo is all smiles. "Now I know what was wrong," he says. "I left the 'dee' off of 'dum'."

"No wonder it didn't work for you," Blackrock says.

"Since yuh have been so nice to show me how to do this trick," Boo Boo adds, "I will say no more about pocketbooks."

We get on our horses and head back toward Polecat.

"Boo Boo," I say worried, "I have a feeling that this egg trick is not so simple as it looks on the surface."

"Hopewell," he says, "being a married man makes yuh unduly pessimistic, and no mistake!"

Him being the sheriff, I say no more. Also, being reminded I am a married man, I realize a very horrible fact. There has been so much going on this day that I forgot to stop at Nailhead Nutter's store to leave the bracelet and the five dollars which my wife give me at breakfast time. I slip a hand into a coat pocket and am relieved no little to find that both money and bracelet are safe.

Before we go very far, it turns a dark dark, there being clouds hiding the stars and the moon.

"Boo Boo," I say presently, "mebbe we should of brought our guns. It would be no little bad to meet Holdup Harry."

The moon comes out bright between two clouds, and I see that Boo Boo is looking about anxious.

"Leave us not mention such as Holdup Harry, Hopewell. Leave us whistle a few cheerful tunes and—"

Our horses give sudden starts, and what should we see but a stooped, old

man with a long beard, standing in the trail, pointing a big six steady at us.

"This is a holdup!" he says harsh. "Dismount and shell out, or as shore as I'm Holdup Harry, I'll plug yuh both!"

"Don't shoot!" Boo Boo bleats. "We are totally unarmed!"

The next thing we know, we are standing on our feet, and Holdup Harry has shooed our horses away and has took seventy-five cents from Boo Boo, and the bracelet and the five smackeroos from me.

"Adios, gents," Holdup Harry says, and the next second he has disappeared behind some trees, and we hear the squeak of leather and the pound of hoofs.

"This is indeed a purty howdy-do, and no mistake!" Boo Boo says mortified. "No hoss, an' five miles from Polecat!"

"Our horses will turn up," I say, "but likely I have saw the last of the money and bracelet. Boo Boo, I am in the doghouse, and then some! When I tell my wife we was robbed—"

"Hopewell," he says hoarse, "yuh cannot mention that we, the Law of Coyote County, was robbed. Should old man Bundy learn of this and print it in the Polecat *News*, our goose is cooked."

"But I will have to tell my wife, or—"

"You won't tell nobody! If yore wife gets too inquisitive, tell her yuh locked the bracelet and money up in the jail safe so's it would not get lost, an' we have mislaid the combination. Come payday, we can give Nailhead five dollars and the price of the bracelet, an' no one will be the wiser."

"Boo Boo," I say grateful, "it is a no little pleasure to work for a man who is smart like you."

WHEN we arrive in Polecat, we find our horses waiting for us at the stable back of the jail. Everybody is in bed, so we know that no one has observed that we have come home on foot.

"Hopewell," my wife says, waking up when I get home, "how come you are out so late?"

I tell her a long story about how we have been looking for missing pocketbooks and Holdup Harry, which she believes.

"Hopewell," she asks, "did you pay for the beads and leave the bracelet with Nailhead like I told you to?"

"Yes, indeed," I say, and she goes back to sleep, content.

The next morning at breakfast, she says no more about the bracelet, and I eat in happy silence until there is a knock at the door. And who should come in but Nailhead Nutter himself, who runs the general store and sells everything, and then some.

"Good mornin', folks," he says, tipping his hat polite and putting it back on his head. "Just dropped in to see if yuh had made up yore mind about the beads an' the bracelet. My wife has took a notion to wear whichever yuh don't wear to the party."

"Hopewell," my wife says grim, "I thought you said—"

"My dear," I say, thinking rapid. "You was sleepy last night and misunderstood me. Being too busy to go see Nailhead yesterday, I locked the money and the bracelet in the jail safe. And what should happen, but we went and lost the combination."

"I do not believe it!" my wife says.

"Me, neither," Nailhead says, eyeing me cold. "But before I start trouble, I will check with Boo Boo, although he is a no little liar hisself."

I take one look at my wife's stony countenance, and say, "I will go with you to help check, Nailhead."

We go out and walk along the street, and Nailhead says, "Hopewell, yuh'd better be tellin' the truth, or else!"

"Nailhead," I say solemn, "cross my heart, the money and bracelet are in the safe, and no mistake! As soon as we find the combination, all will be well."

We walk into the jail office, and what should we find but Boo Boo setting in his chair, sleeping sound and the safe door standing wide open.

"Ah, ha!" Nailhead roars, looking into the safe. "So yuh lost the combination!"

Boo Boo wakes with a start and blinks no little irritated. "Hopewell," he says, "ain't I told yuh never, never to wake me thusly when I am napping? Oh, hello, Nailhead."

"Don't hello me!" Nailhead roars. "What I smell is a very dead rat, and no mistake! And I am not one to take being swindled out of five dollars and a bracelet setting down! If I am not paid immediate, I will raise a stink that will make headlines a foot high in Bundy's news sheet!"

I look at Boo Boo and wonder if my face is as pale as his'n.

"Nailhead," he says feeble, "in due time, yuh will be paid."

"Mebbe," Nailhead says crafty, "yuh are borrowin' the bracelet for some gal to wear tonight? Who is she, Boo Boo?"

"That is not the way of it," I say quick, wanting to help Boo Boo all I can. "Last night while we was coming home, we was robbed by Holdup Harry."

"Ah, ha!" he says. "Two lawmen robbed! That shore sounds fishy!"

"Hopewell," Boo Boo roars, "now the cat is out of the bag!"

"Mebbe it is true, after all," Nailhead murmurs.

"Of course, it's true," Boo Boo says. "And there is only one way for you to get yore money and that is to wait till the end of the month when my deputy and I are paid. If yuh do not keep yore trap shut about this whole matter, yuh will not get one single cent of money, and no mistake!"

Nailhead thinks this over with a deep frown. "That," he mutters, "is a hoss of a different color. If bracelet an' money are both gone—"

"They are," Boo Boo says unhappy.

"Then I'll have to trust yuh, but,"—and Nailhead's voice grows harsh, "it seems to me it is about time yuh moved yore fat carcass from that easy chair and went around and about, looking for Holdup Harry. Incidental, I lost my pocketbook with one-eighty-three in it. Boo Boo, I demand instantaneous action, or I will not keep my mouth shut, bracelet, five dollars, or not!"

He departs with a no little violent slam of the door.

Boo Boo turns wrathful eyes upon me. "Hopewell, as a deputy yuh've got no more brains than a mosquito. Now we have got to spend the day looking around and about for Holdup Harry, and I will have no time to practise the egg trick before tonight."

"I am utmostly sorry," is all I can say.

"Also, who is Holdup Harry? A red-whispered hombre like Shoe-on Sorby says, or a ole jasper like who held us up? And there is the matter of locating a derby to use tonight. Mincemeat Malone will not likely give us a loan of his'n. Hopewell, think of something."

"Mebbe we can borrow Blackrock's derby," I murmur.

BOO BOO of a sudden does not look quite so mad. "Hopewell, that is a possibility. But at the moment, leave us saddle and ride into the country. When Nailhead Nutter is put out, he is not one to trifle with."

We go to the stable and saddle up, and I help Boo Boo into leather, him being slightly too heavy to do much climbing. We turn our horses and ride past Nailhead's store so he will be sure to see we are on the job.

Suddenly who should we see walking down the street side by side but a very dapper gent and a lady wearing much glittering jewelry and of considerable size and well powdered. She is none other than the Widow Gertrude Gollygee, who has come to Polecat for the annual homecoming. The gent, I recognize, is a citizen of some years previous by the name of Bill Bloom, commonly known as Pretty-boy on account of he is tall, dark and handsome and has a way with the ladies.

Boo Boo also sees them, and a dark look comes to his face. "I do not like the smell of things," he says grim. "I wisht utmostly that Pretty-boy would do something whereby I could toss him in jail."

"Pretty-boy," I say regretful, "although a practical joker at times, is not one to break the law."

Boo Boo sighs deep. "Leave us ride up for a moment's visit and see which way the wind is blowing."

We ride up to Pretty-boy and Gertrude. "Mrs. Gollygee," Boo Boo says, "I see yuh are as pretty as ever."

This is a true statement, Gertrude having never been pretty, but she does not take it this way, but thinks she is being told she is pretty, and giggles and rolls her eyes at Pretty-boy, who scowls at Boo Boo, who he is not fond of in the first place.

"Well, Boo Boo," Pretty-boy says nasty, "I see yuh ain't lost no weight since last year."

Boo Boo's face turns somewhat pinker than of previous. "You, Mr. Bloom," he says, "are looking old and somewhat feeble."

Pretty-boy gives a snort and is about to make a pointed reply, when the widow says sweet, "Mr. Bounce, are you going to try for the grand prize tonight?"

Boo Boo gives her a warm smile and

bows as best he can, considering his shape and size and that he is in a saddle.

"Mrs. Gollygee, I am, and no mistake! Also, I might add that what I will do will be the sensation of the evening. Come, Deputy, leave us move on about our duties."

I cast a glance at Pretty-boy and see that Boo Boo's words about being the sensation of the evening has him somewhat worried. I tip my hat polite and follow Boo Boo on along the street.

Of a sudden, Boo Boo says, "Deputy, we forgot something. Ride back to Stinky Jo's and have him put together some half-dozen sandwiches for us to take along."

I ride back to Stinky Joe's, and who should be in there, drinking soda pop very cozy, but the widow and Pretty-boy. While Stinky Joe is working on the sandwiches, Pretty-boy sidles up and gives me a no little friendly smile full of weird white teeth.

"Friend Hopewell," he says, "I am of the opinion that Boo Boo is too dumb to enter any contest at the party tonight. Unless he would imitate a hippopotamus. Ha, ha! Leave me buy yuh a ten-cent cigar."

"Thank you," I say, "but Boo Boo is a shade brighter than you realize. He is going to break six eggs into a hat and take out a live chicken."

"My, my!" he says. "That will be a sensation."

Feeling no little friendly toward Pretty-boy, I take the sandwiches and the cigar and ride to where at Boo Boo is waiting in the shade of a big cottonwood.

"Where did yuh get the cigar?" he asks, and I tell him it was give to me by a friend, but I do not tell him what friend, for the dislike between Boo Boo and Pretty-boy Bloom is very deep and of long standing.

FOLLOWING the creek a few miles, it seems like the sun begins to burn more hotly. Boo Boo leads the way into the thick timber, crawls from saddle and sets down against a tree trunk.

"Deputy," he sighs, "it is a hot day, and no mistake. I must not wear myself to a frazzle so's I cannot perform well tonight. Leave us spend the day here and save Holdup Harry for another time."

So I unsaddle, spread blankets on the ground in the shade, and we make ourselves to home. Noon comes and we eat.

"I wisht," Boo Boo says, "I had a derby and six eggs so I could practise my magic. It would be no little embarrassing should I forget the right words tonight."

He closes his eyes and says over and over, "Hocus pocus, razzle dazzle, dilly dumdee."

He is so busy saying it, and me listening to see that he makes no mistake, that we are utmostly took by surprise when a voice says, "What's eatin' on fatty?"

We look up and see a long, lean stranger on a black horse. And what should the stranger have on his thick black hair but a very shiny derby hat.

Boo Boo's eyes fix on the derby, and he forgets he has been called fatty.

"Welcome to Coyote County, stranger," he says. "Light, and my deputy will share a sandwich with yuh."

The stranger shakes his head. "Sorry, but I'm on my way to Polecat to attend the homecoming party tonight and must hurry along as I have numerous things to attend to."

"Are you a old citizen of Polecat?" I ask polite.

"Oh, yes, indeed," he nods. "When I was a mere boy, I lived there. Perhaps yuh have heard of the name Jones?"

"Seems that name is somewhat familiar," Boo Boo says, still eyeing the derby.

"Well, I'm one of old man Jones' boys. I have always wanted to attend the annual homecoming, but somethin' always kept me away until this year."

He turns his horse about and rides away, and I look at Boo Boo and see a big smile on his fat face.

"Hopewell," he says, "the derby hat problem is now solved."

"Yes," I say. "But, Boo Boo, sometimes I have a strong feeling that by merely saying a few words, you cannot turn six broken eggs into a chicken."

"I would agree with yuh, Hopewell," he says, "only I saw it done twice. Seeing is believing, and no mistake! Also, I might add that there are numerous things about black magic which the average man, such as I an' you, never will understand. For hundred of years, people have been saying mysterious words and—"

"True," I admit, "but—"

"Leave us not question the unknown, Deputy. Leave us instead close our eyes and get in a nap before tonight."

We sleep till about sundown, then saddle our horses and ride back toward Polecat very refreshed. Crossing the creek at the ford, what should we see amongst some scrub pines but a covered wagon and a campfire with Blackrock the Mysterious setting by, watching a frying pan and a coffee pot.

Seeing us, he mutters something which we cannot quite hear and looks worried. But when Boo Boo gives him a friendly smile, he loses his worried look.

"Good afternoon, gents," he says. "Have a cup of coffee."

We dismount and approach the campfire.

"Friend," Boo Boo says, "how is yore lovely assistant feeling today?"

Blackrock turns his sunk-in eyes on the covered wagon. "Not so good," he says in a hoarse whisper. "Don't say anything, but I am wondering if she could have smallpox."

I glance at Boo Boo and see he is somewhat pale.

"On second thought," he says quick, "I believe me and my deputy will decline a cup of coffee. Come, Hopewell, leave us move on to town. Incidental, Mr. Blackrock, I hope yuh will not bring yore assistant to our fair city if it is smallpox."

"I won't," Blackrock promises.

We mount and ride away at a fast clip. Boo Boo shudders no little. "Hopewell, smallpox is not nothing to fool around with, and no mistake! Leave us hope we have caught no germs whilst stopping to talk."

EVEN tho it is dark when we ride into town, that does not keep Nailhead Nutter from seeing us.

"Well," he asks cold, "what is the good news, Sheriff?"

Boo Boo swallows hard, and says, "Nailhead, I am happy to report that we have got a line on Holdup Harry. It is only a matter of hours until we capture him, or my name ain't—"

"It's about time," Nailhead says.

We ride on, and I ask, "Boo Boo, why did you tell Nailhead that very fancy lie just now?"

"To keep him quiet until after tonight," Boo Boo replies. "If I can win the grand prize and thusly make Gertrude Gollygee see that in me she can find a very clever husband, and then some, my troubles is over."

"Boo Boo," I say, "I am not one to dampen anybody's fire, but it seems that with Pretty-boy Bloom in town, it will take more than breaking eggs in a derby to—"

"Hopewell," he says icy, "leave us not mention Pretty-boy Bloom again in my presence. Also, may I add that the moment I pull a live chicken out of Mr. Jones' derby and Gertrude hears the 'ohs' an' 'aws' of the audience, she will forgot there is such a jasper as him, who I will not mention by name."

"Mebbe so," I say, "but—"

"No buts, Hopewell. Now, kindly rush home and put on a necktie to get ready for the big party, for my assistant must look his best, and no mistake!"

I go home, and my wife says, "Hopewell, have you found the combination to the jail safe yet?"

"No," I say, and she says, "That is a shame. Now Mrs. Nutter won't have the bracelet to wear."

I say nothing, hoping she will do the same, which she does, her being in the process of making herself look as pretty as possible for the big party, which is a tough job, and then some. I put on a tie and set down to wait till my wife is ready. By then it is time to go to the lodge hall.

The Polecat Annual Pilgrims Basket-dinner and Homecoming party is a no little society event, and then some. Not only do the citizens of Polecat turn out in their Sunday best, but also former residents come from here and yon to attend, such as Gertrude Gollygee, Pretty-boy Bloom, the Mr. Jones with the derby, and numerous others.

The moment we arrive, I observe that there is quite a crowd already gathered, including Boo Boo, Gertrude and Pretty-boy. There is much visiting until Mayor Mincemeat Malone yells that the food is ready.

Just as I am on my fifth chicken leg, Boo Boo comes up and touches me on the shoulder.

"Deputy," he says, "I forgot the eggs. As soon as yuh finish eating, kindly run over to the jail office and get same. I left them in the drawer of my desk, and do not fall down."

There is a sudden sound of someone choking, and I look up and see Pretty-boy acrost the table looking no little red.

"Excuse me, folks," he sputters, "but I must of swallowed a chicken bone." And he rushes outside.

"Hope he strangles!" Boo Boo says in a whisper. And then he looks worried. "Hopewell, I ain't seen nothing of Mr. Jones and his derby. Have you?"

"No," I answer.

"Funny," he says. "Yuh'd think he'd come in time to eat."

He goes back to his table and sets down. I eat until I cannot hold one single bite more, then put on my hat, go outside and head toward the jail. And who should I meet but Mr. Jones on his black horse and wearing the derby very jaunty. "You better hurry," I say, "or the grub will be gone."

"I'm going just for the entertainment," he says.

At the jail office, I find the sack of eggs in the desk drawer. Also, I find something else. The letter which I gave Boo Boo the day before. It has not been opened, which is no way for a sheriff to handle his mail, even if he has other things on his mind. So I open it.

It is from Sheriff Prize of Northfork and warns us about Holdup Harry. I read that said desperado is a man of many disguises. "Even has been known to dress like a woman," I read. All this, I realize, is something Boo Boo ought to know.

I hurry back to the lodge hall and am about to go in when someone steps out from the darkness and says very loud, "Boo!" I am no little startled and drop the eggs, which break very crunchy. And then I see it is Pretty-boy Bloom who has booed me.

"This is no time for yore jokes!" I say wrathful.

"I'm sorry, Hopewell," he says unhappy. "I didn't know yuh was carryin' eggs. Just to show yuh how sorry I am, wait a minute, and I will get yuh another batch."

He disappears and is gone some time. Then he comes back and hands me a sack. "There yuh are," he says. "I got 'em even if I did have to rob Grandma Grinder's henhouse."

He goes on in, while I stop to count the eggs. There are exactly six.

When I step into the lodge hall, I see there is no chance to tell Boo Boo about the letter, for the tables have been cleared away and the program is ready to begin.

Mayor Mincemeat Malone is on the stage and calling for all contestants to come forward. Which they do.

There is Boo Boo and numerous others, including Bing Bong Beemer, the blacksmith. I cannot understand what stunt Bing Bong can do until someone says he is going to lift a anvil with his teeth.

Looking around, I see Pretty-boy and Gertrude setting on the front row of seats, which I know Boo Boo will dislike utmostly. Also, on the front row is Mr. Jones with his derby. My wife has saved a seat and motions for me to come set with her. This I do.

JUST about then, the program gets under way with some singing and banjo playing. And then the mayor says, "Next we will be entertained with a feat of magic by our well-known sheriff."

Ignoring a few boos and hisses, Boo Boo waddles to the table in the center of the stage and bows no little professional. "Will my assistant kindly step up," he says.

I walk up on the stage with the sack of eggs.

"Lay them out in a neat row on the table," Boo Boo whispers. Then, loud, "Will some kind gent loan me his derby hat? Ah, this man in the front row has a derby. One of ole man Jones' boys, I see, who has come back to his ole home town. Step right up, Mr. Jones. Leave us not be bashful."

I am busy laying the eggs gentle in a neat row on the table, but I notice that Mr. Jones is somewhat reluctant to bring up his derby. However, numerous people setting around him lift him to his feet and help him up the steps to the stage.

"Thank yuh, my friend," Boo Boo says, shaking Mr. Jones' hand friendly.

Before Mr. Jones can recover from the handshake, Boo Boo grabs the derby and places it on the table beside the eggs. Then he pulls the round stick from his pocket and waves it over the hat.

"Ladies and gents," he says very distinct, "on this table yuh see a empty hat and six fresh eggs, nothing more nor less, and no mistake!"

"Hopewell," Bing Bong Beemer whis-

pers, "them eggs remind me that Pretty-boy Bloom was in my shop this afternoon, askin' where at he could find six rotten eggs. Now, why would he—"

A great faintness suddenly fills me, for I am remembering Pretty-boy's fondness for playing jokes and how he give me those six eggs. Not knowing whether to run, or set still and hold my nose, I watch Boo Boo pick up a egg in his fat fingers.

"Ladies an' gents," he says, "I will now bust this here egg—"

A disturbance in the back of the room makes him frown severe, but does not stop him.

"—an' drop it into Mr. Jones' hat. Six eggs in all I shall thusly bust an'—"

That is as far as he gets, for at that moment Mr. Jones whips two six-guns out from under his coat and flourishes them very dangerous.

"Don't nobody move!" he says harsh. "This is a holdup. My friend in the back of the room will pass amongst yuh with a sack into which yuh're to deposit all valuables. If there is any trouble, somebody will get plugged!"

That is when I see what has caused the disturbance in the back of the room. A gent has come in through the back door with a black mask over his face and a sack in his hands.

A very silent silence settles over the room, for one look at Mr. Jones' hard face is enough to tell everybody that he will tolerate no foolishness. Then my eyes shift to Boo Boo, and I see he is whiter than a snowstorm in January. And what should happen while I am looking at him but the egg slips from his trembling fingers and falls to the table.

A very surprising thing happens. That egg hits a egg on the table, which starts a very startling chain reaction, and there follows six rapid "plops" as each and every egg explodes very spattery. Instantaneous, a no little offensive odor fills the air. It is so offensive that nobody can think of anything else. Not even Mr. Jones himself.

There is a sudden scramble as all contestants try to get down the stage steps at the same time, including me and Mr. Jones. How it happens, I am not sure, but someway I get a foot tangled up with Mr. Jones' legs, and he falls down the steps. And Boo Boo, who is utmostly awkward when he moves rapid, stumbles and falls right on top of the desperado.

NOW, it is a no little catastrophe to have a man the size of Boo Boo Bounce fall on you. So it is a good fifteen minutes before Mr. Jones regains consciousness and is able to admit he is none other than Holdup Harry. In the meantime, the masked man has been caught, and he turns out to be no one else but Blackrock the Mysterious.

It is not generally recognized that Boo Boo's capture of Holdup Harry is accidental, so he is praised long and loud. "A very brave feat, and no mistake!" the mayor says.

"What a story for my newspaper!" old Bundy says unhappy.

"Three cheers for Boo Boo!" Bing Bong Beemer yells. Then, scowling, "Pretty-boy Bloom had ought to be rid out of town on a rail for playing that rotten egg joke on Boo Boo!"

But Pretty-boy is no place to be found, him having slipped out and left town.

Later, we ride out to Blackrock's camp and find in the covered wagon a great amount of loot, including the silver bracelet. Also, numerous disguises of Holdup Harry's, including a blond wig and women's clothes, which he wore when he was acting as Blackrock's pretty assistant for the magic shows, whereat he snitched pocketbooks when he read people's minds.

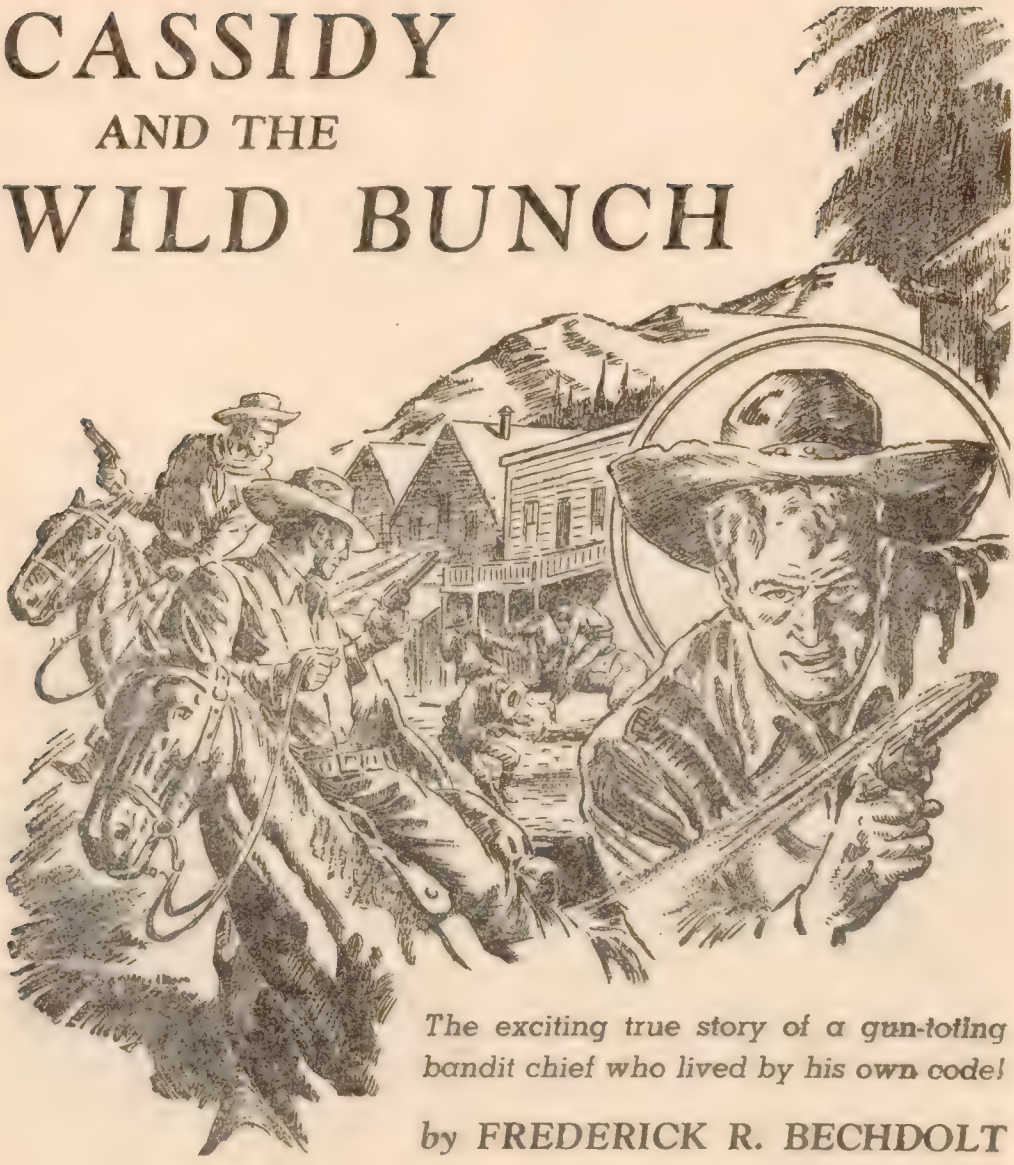
It is the next morning, and Boo Boo and I are setting in the jail office, resting, when I say, "It is too bad about the widow Gollygee leaving town in a huff on account of her dress being badly spattered last night."

Boo Boo smiles and shakes his head. "In a way, it is a good thing. Since I have been awarded the loving cup and am the hero of Coyote County, I am more or less content to continue with my single life of bliss."

"It was nice of Nailhead Nutter to keep his mouth shut and give my wife both bracelet and beads and me the five smackeroos for helping capture Holdup Harry," I murmur. "Incidental, we have Holdup's derby. Now, all we need is a half-dozen eggs, and—"

"Hopewell," Boo Boo says, turning no little pale, "never, never mention eggs to me again!" And he gets up and heads for the fresh air very fast indeed, and no mistake!

CASSIDY AND THE WILD BUNCH



The exciting true story of a gun-toting bandit chief who lived by his own code!

by FREDERICK R. BECHDOLT

BUTCH CASSIDY was the name he used when he came to the Wild Bunch. Before that time he was a rough-and-tumble cowboy down in southern Utah, a young coarse-grained rowdy of the saddle with blue eyes and a shock of flaxen hair. He was one of the big-boned, untidy breed who went about in worn overalls and sweat-stained sombreros, unadorned by colored neckerchiefs or other gaudy trappings of their craft. Bow-legged, shabby chewers of tobacco—in the saddle they are picturesque beyond description. They say he could ride the meanest horse that ever traded ends while it was pitching.

Bronco-breaking in the pole corrals, hard riding in the country of tinted

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bluffs that drop away into the depths of blue haze where flows the Colorado, the long *tête-a-tête* with Death at the crossing during the summer flood—all these were in the day's work. And for playtime there were the cow-towns. Green River knew him and Moab and Vernal. They were all alike—whisky, stud-poker, faro, and the girls. He started in at sixteen, and after three years of it he was getting tough.

So he rode away from Utah leaving his real name behind him. Many of them had ridden away, as this tow-headed young rowdy was riding, to drift from hiding-place to hiding-place with prices on their heads.

Cowboy outlaws are as extinct now as bison and blanket Indians. The conditions that created them can never be repeated, and in this day when those conditions have ceased to exist, it is hard to understand the men who were so often big in their very badness. In the Eighties, when Cassidy went wrong, the last of the breed worthy of the name were beginning to gather in a loosely organized band which was called "The Wild Bunch."

Many Types of Outlaws

They came from half a dozen States and Territories; seasoned desperadoes from New Mexico and Texas; horse-thieves from Utah and Colorado; stock-rustlers from Montana and Wyoming; youths who had never burned powder save in some cow-town frolic and cold-eyed killers with thousands of dollars rewards out against them. In that era when the law was beginning to get its first real grip on the sage-brush country, they sought sanctuary in the patches of wilderness which still existed: Brown's Park, the Robbers' Roost, the Hole in the Wall, and the Lost Cabin Country.

The bigger men among them became acquainted with one another. They learned the different rendezvous, the places where a fugitive could get fresh horses and information.

These were the conditions when Cassidy turned his back on the law and left his real name behind him. At that time a small, dark-featured cowboy from Montana got into trouble in the hamlet of Landusky, by the Musselshell. Old Pike Landusky, who was quite a figure in the country, made the mistake of calling him an insulting name and paid for it with his life.

It was a fair fight, but the friends of the dead man were in control of the county offices, so the slayer left the country. He took the name of Harvey Logan. He and his brother, Lonny, drifted down into eastern Wyoming, where they met Harry Lonabaugh, who had just begun to steal horses. In time Butch Cassidy fell in with them.

The three, Cassidy, Lonabaugh, and Harvey Logan, became the leaders of the Wild Bunch. Among its members were Bob Leigh, Camella Hanks, Flat-Nosed George, Bob Kilpatrick, and Ben Carver.

But this is really the story of Butch Cassidy while he was riding along the unmarked route which was called the "Outlaw Trail."

Wind River knew him in the autumn of 1889. He came into this part of Wyoming with a shallow-eyed young specimen of the breed who were to be found dealing stud in every cow-town or tending bar or doing anything to make money—except hard work. "Al" Hainer was the partner's name. They bought the Charley Peterson place on Horse Creek. They had it fenced before snow flew. Some time later they brought in a band of horses.

The winter of 1889-90 was memorable because Mrs. Simpson, who was the first white woman in the country, had sent word for every one to come to her home for Christmas dinner.

Before the morning was half over the guests were arriving. They were visible from afar, black dots moving across the white expanse. Soon the forms of ponies and riders grew, distinct. Then came the jingle of bitt-chains, the soft scuffle of hoofs in the snow; voices down by the barn. Within a few moments, the new-comers had joined the watchers at the frost-rimed windows in the sitting-room.

"Here comes Curt and Shorty from the Circle Bar," or "there's the Swede from Dry Crick."

Christmas Dinner

So the announcements went one after another. Along toward noon some one said:

"Them's the two that's got the Peterson place."

"I seen the white-haired one in Lander last September," another proclaimed; "Cassidy's his name. He sure can ride."

"Who's his partner? The one with the yeller handkerchief an' the fancy boots."

"Oh, him—*I* don't know. Mormon from down Vernal way som'ers."

The constraint that had been hanging over them in this pleasant sitting-room passed with the arrival of the pair from Horse Creek. It cannot be said that any one brightened up at the sight of Al Hainer, but Cassidy brought the spirit of frolic with him. Before dinner was on the table those who had grinned in silence were beginning to laugh aloud. The children hovered close about him.

In the afternoon there was an egg-nog, and then they had games. There are old-timers who tell to this day how the cowboys of Wind River roared and the children shrieked with mirth. Butch Cassidy set the pace, with his tow-colored hair in wild disorder and his puckered blue eyes blazing.

Young Jim Simpson, who was barely turned sixteen, saw him that Christmas day and straightway rendered unto him a boy's full-hearted worship. Butch Cassidy became his hero.

It was the year of the first influenza epidemic—"the grippe" they called it then. There was a period when all the cowboys in the camp were taken down, save Cassidy. He used to saddle up once a week and ride fifty miles to Simpson's.

"Dr. Cassidy," he always announced himself, "come to report on my patients and get some more medicine."

Then he would sit beside the stove and have a bite to eat and a talk with Mrs. Simpson. There was an ingenuousness about him which warmed her heart toward him.

The months went by. Spring came, and by that time the pair at the Peterson place had disposed of their horses by sale and barter to stockmen of the neighborhood. One day they rode away, and Wind River saw no more of them.

The next autumn they showed up in Lander. The old cow-town was ready to meet a man half-way in fight or frolic. Cassidy slapped it on the back, so to speak, and was taken into high favor. Now and again he and his partner took advantage of an opportunity to bank one of the faro or monte snaps that were usually taken by the regular gamblers.

They always had plenty of money. It was generally understood that they had made it trading horses. Some spoke of having seen them in the Lost Cabin country.

Those were the days of open gambling and open drinking, when there were at least one or two faro lay-outs in almost every saloon; when every bar was adorned, at every hour of the twenty-four, with anywhere from one to a dozen of Lander's leading citizens.

Strange Frontier Codes

It did not matter who you were or where you came from but it did matter how you comported yourself. The unwritten code varied somewhat from any we know nowadays.

It cannot be said that Lander was deeply shocked when a dénouement came in the spring of 1894. The two partners had left the town early in the winter. By the time the grass was strong again, Bob Calverly, deputy sheriff of Frémont County, came back after a long absence. With him he brought a band of Padlock horses, which had been missing from their range in the Owl Creek Mountains ever since last fall, and two prisoners. Cassidy was one and Al Hainer was the other.

Most of the details came out before the trial was over. W. A. Richards, the president of the Wyoming Stockgrowers' Association, and Sheriff John Ward of Frémont County had been working together for some time to break up a band of big horse-thieves who had been plundering through this part of the State. Bob Calverly had followed the trail of sixty ponies down past Green River, and westward through the desert to a lonely cabin near Hames Fork in the southeastern corner of Wyoming. With him he had a companion who had taken Hainer easily enough. That did not surprise Lander.

Nor was Lander at all surprised to learn that Bob Calverly had creased Cassidy along the top of the head with a shot from his forty-five revolver and broken his jaw with the six-shooter before he was able to arrest him. It has been said that Lander was not shocked at the dénouement. Those were rough days, and the average man was used to all sorts of companions. There was

many a good citizen who cherished a sneaking regard for the prisoner because of that fight. And when it came to that, Bob Calverly and Sheriff John Ward did not think any the less of him for it, either.

The case was tried in July. Hainer was acquitted, and from now on he comes no more into this story. Cassidy's lawyer had a fine alibi, a bill of sale from a Nebraska man for the horses that were mentioned in the indictment. But when the attorney was about to produce the document and show it to the jury, a court attaché came to his side.

"See that big man in the middle of the fourth row?" the official whispered and when the lawyer nodded he went on: "Well, he's the fellow whose name is signed to your bill of sale. The prosecution has got him here." And so the paper was not produced, and the case for the defense fell flat.

Will Simpson, whose mother had given that Christmas dinner on Wind River, had recently been elected district attorney. Although he cherished a warm man-to-man liking for the defendant, he did his part so vigorously that he got a conviction. Judge Jesse Knight sentenced Cassidy to two years in the penitentiary at Laramie City.

Gets Prison Furlough

On the evening before Cassidy's departure to serve his sentence, Ben Sheldon, the clerk of the court, was watering his garden, when the night jailer leaned over the fence.

"Sheriff Ward," the jailer said, "is out of town, and Butch Cassidy wants me to leave him loose tonight. He says there's something he wants to tend to and that nobody in town will see him. He promises he'll show up by the break of day."

"If Cassidy says so," Ben Sheldon answered, "he'll keep his word."

So the convicted man went forth that night, no one knew where; nor did any one ever learn whom he saw. He was back at the jail door before dawn and went to Laramie City that same day to begin serving his sentence.

About a year and a half later two men sat down together in the warden's office of the Wyoming penitentiary. The prison officials withdrew, leaving the pair facing each other—Butch Cassidy and W. A. Richards, former president of the stockmen's association. Now he was Governor of the state and Cassidy was suing for pardon.

Governor Richards had good reasons for this visit. Many men had signed the petition for pardon. Among them was Judge Jesse Knight, who had gone to the extent of making a personal intercession for the man whom he had sentenced.

There were other motives to bring Wyoming's governor to Laramie City. He was not saying anything about these.

"What's the reason you want a pardon?" the Governor asked.

"I've only a few months left to do." Cassidy's eyes bored straight into the Governor's. "So it don't make much difference to the State if I go now. But it makes a heap of difference with me. I've some property down in Colorado."

He went on to explain how the restoration of his citizenship would be of great material benefit to him.

Governor Richards listened in silence, and he weighed his own reasons for his visit in his mind. During the last year and a half he had learned much concerning the horse-thieves who were making life a burden for the Wyoming stockmen. Sheriff John Ward had told him how powerful the band was and how this young fellow was undoubtedly among their leaders. There was a great deal the Governor did not yet know, but he had enough to make him certain that the man whom he was facing was going to be a big menace to the State if he kept on in the way he had been going.

So now the Governor made his proposition.

"Will you give me your word that you'll straighten up?"

But the prisoner interrupted him with assurances that he did not intend to reform. There was no use of his making any such promises. He had gone too far to take the back track, and he did not propose to lie about it. Being an old cowman, the governor began to feel secure in one thing: here was a man whose word he could trust.

Cassidy Makes Promise

It is not known whether Cassidy had an inkling of the stake that Governor Richards was playing for. But the fact remains that at this juncture he made his counter-proposition.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he said. "If you'll give me a pardon, I'll promise you that I'll never molest the State of Wyoming again."

So it came about that the two of them made a treaty then and there; and from this time on those members of the Wild Bunch who stole horses and robbed trains in Wyoming operated under Harvey Logan, while Butch Cassidy did his plundering elsewhere.

When he left the penitentiary there were two young friends of his, in the Green River jail awaiting trial on charges of stock-rustling. They were both penniless. He went across the line to Montpelier, Idaho, robbed the bank, brought eight thousand dollars of the proceeds to Rock Springs, where he turned it over the lawyer defending the pair, and then he vanished down in the Brown's Park country.

Charley Siringo, who used to be one of the Panhandle's wild young riders and afterward went to man-hunting as a vocation, gives in his reminiscences a glimpse of Cassidy during the journey southward after the Montpelier robbery.

The outlaw and his companions were lying over at a little settlement in the Snake River country throwing the looted money away across the only bar in the place as fast as they could manage it, when Cassidy discovered an old widow who owned a flock of chickens. She had come into the country in the early days and was famous far and wide for her profanity. Tossing gold over the counter for lukewarm whisky was beginning to get monotonous. He sought out the widow's feathered flock and listened joyously to her swearing while he shot the heads off her hens. When he had plumbed the depths of her vocabulary he counted the slain and gave her a twenty-dollar piece for every chicken.

If you care to go to the trouble, open an old atlas to the maps of Utah and Colorado. In the northwestern corner of the Colorado, with the Uintah Indian reservation bordering it on the west and the Red Desert on the north, lay the Brown's Park country. Two hundred miles due south you will find the Uncompaghre plateau; and over in Utah nearly straight west of this, in San Juan County, is a mesa which men called the Robbers' Roost. These were the rendezvous where his portion of the Wild Bunch used to hide out after robberies.

There are plenty of men who used to drink with them in Vernal. Green River, Utah, on the Denver and Rio Grande saw them often. Matt Warner kept a saloon there, and they were among the most boisterous of his customers. Sometimes they rode into the sleepy little town of Bluff and bought themselves cartridges. One could gather a hundred jovial anecdotes from these places; but it was another story when they went about their business.

Officers were warned to have sufficient assistance and be fully armed, when attempting to arrest these outlaws, as they were always heavily armed and would make a determined resistance before submitting to arrest, not hesitating to kill if necessary.

Butch Killed Nobody

So read one of the old reward circulars. Utah and Colorado lost several brave peace-officers in grim battles with the band out on the broken uplands. But none of those dead are laid to Cassidy's account.

"I've never killed a man yet, nor robbed anybody, only a big corporation," he told Beecher Sheldon one day during these years.

That was in Reno, Nevada. Young Sheldon, who had known Cassidy in the Lander days, recognized him on the street. Sheldon had a talk with Cassidy, and the outlaw made that statement as to his record. The circulars of the detective agencies contain no accusation to the contrary. Cassidy owned a marvelous coolness that more than once kept him from shooting; but that cannot be said of some others who rode with him —nor of the swarthy little man who was leading the northern bandits during these years in Wyoming.

There was more than one real killer in the Wild Bunch, and if this tow-haired rowdy, who came to be the most formidable outlaw of them all, had not been endowed with good luck and a remarkable repression when it came to using his trigger-finger, his story would never have begotten the sympathy it did. For it includes but one slaying, and that came at the very last—and under circumstances that lift it to the height of clean tragedy.

One night he came to Castle Gate. It was the evening before payday, and the

coal camp in the Wasatch Mountains was waiting on the morrow. Near the lower end of the street a quiet poker game was going on in one of the drinking establishments.

It was the only activity of its sort in Castle Gate that evening. It was proceeding listlessly enough when Cassidy entered the place. His worn overalls, soiled sombrero, and high-heeled boots proclaimed him to be a cowboy, and the tin-horns were more than ready to let him sit in. When two hours or so had gone by he shoved back his wide-brimmed hat.

"Well, boys," he said, "you've cleaned me."

With that he sauntered over to the bar and beckoned to the proprietor.

"There's two or three of us camping just outside the town," he explained, "and we're going out with some cattle down Price way in the morning. The boys sent me in to buy three bottles of Old Crow. I kind of hate to go back to them without the whisky."

"Sure," the saloon-keeper told him, for when he is the owner of the game a man can afford to be magnanimous to one who had dropped one hundred and fifty dollars. "That's all right, fellow. The liquor's on me." He wrapped up three bottles.

But Cassidy shook his head.

"That ain't the idee," said he. "All that I'm asking for is credit."

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it, hand me the money next time you're riding by," the proprietor bade him.

Outlaw Leaves With Liquor

So Cassidy departed with the bottles under his arm, and nobody thought any more about the matter.

It was some time near noon the next morning when the west-bound passenger-train pulled in, and the miners were lining the sidewalk to watch for the arrival of the paymaster. The main street is within a stone's-throw of the railroad track, and almost opposite the depot there was at that time a two-story stone building which contained the company's offices.

The paymaster alighted from the Pullman with a leather sack of money in either hand, and beside him came his armed guard with two big-caliber revolvers hanging from his belt. They did not notice the pair of roughly dressed riders who had come up the thoroughfare from the camp's lower end. So Butch Cassidy and Bob Leigh had swung from their saddles and were facing the paymaster with drawn revolvers before that official, his armed guard, or any one else took any thought of them.

"Hands up," Cassidy bade them.

They say the guard was a good man with his six-shooters, but he had no opportunity to demonstrate his skill that morning. He and the paymaster stood with uplifted arms while Bob Leigh stepped forward, took the money-bags, backed away to his pony, tied the sacks across the horn, and swung into the saddle. Cassidy remained facing the victims, holding his revolver on the two of them, while he walked slowly backward, reaching with his left hand for his pony's rein.

Just then a miner up the street started shooting.

A clerk in the coal company's offices on the second floor of the stone building heard the report, glanced through the window, seized an old Sharp's single-shot rifle, took hasty aim, and pulled the trigger. The slug raised a little dust in front of the pony's forefeet, and the bronco shied away with a snort of fright.

The outlaw held his eyes on the pair before him. His six-shooter remained level upon them. He edged toward the horse.

"Whoa, boy," he said soothingly. "Easy now."

The pony backed off still farther. The clerk reloaded, and the old Sharp's boomed again.

"Hurry, Butch," Bob Leigh cried and added an oath for emphasis.

Three or four miners began shooting up the street. Slugs were snarling by, and some of them were coming pretty close. Cassidy answered evenly over his shoulder:

"Aw, those fellows don't know how to shoot."

He took another step toward the bronco.

"Easy! Easy!"

He always had a way with horses. His left hand found the reins. The armed guard was showing symptoms of uneasiness.

"Just keep 'em up where they be," Cassidy bade him, and swung asaddle.

Bullets Sing Past Him

Every one who had a gun took a shot at the pair as they ran their horses down the street, but the outlaws had their marksmanship pretty well appraised. All the bullets went wild.

Now telegraph instruments began clicking frantic summons. The sheriff got out a posse down at Price. They followed the trail of the robbers across the country to Castle Valley. The track took the pursuers over the desert reaches of the San Rafael swell. Cassidy and Bob Leigh had got a change of horses somewhere along the route, and they made one hundred miles without a stop across the arid wilderness. The weary posse returned to the railroad on jaded ponies.

In the meantime the saloon-keeper who had given Butch Cassidy the three bottles of whisky had delved into the depths of an exhaustive vocabulary to find terms fit for their perfidy. For they had taken with them the best horse in his corral.

Just about the time the first members of the posse returned, he changed his tune. The horse had come back, and tied to its crupper there was a packet containing ten dollars of the stolen money and a hastily scrawled note which said:

This is pay for the three bottles of Old Crow.

In the early days of the Spanish War there was a brief period when the excitement over Cuba was almost overshadowed in several cities of the Rocky Mountain West by tidings that the Wild Bunch was gathering for a great foray. Train-robbers and stock-rustlers of Utah, Montana, Wyoming, and Colorado were rendezvoused near Steamboat Springs. Newspapers were filled with conjectures concerning the coming raid.

There was no lack of official confirmation when it came to essential facts: a dozen or more of the most desperate bandits in the West had assembled in the mountains. Among them were Butch Cassidy, Bob Leigh, Harry Lonabaugh, and the two Curry brothers—Harvey and Lonny Logan.

Express companies equipped their guards, in addition to the messenger, cars with two or more armed guards. The governors of Utah, Wyoming, and Colorado gathered in Salt Lake City to discuss measures of protection.

The conference of executives was attended by representatives of one or two well-known detective agencies and by several man-hunters who had earned good reputations in their own communities. It was bombarded by free advice and petitions for immediate action. The popular idea seemed to be to call out the militia; but the old-timers among the peace-officers gave it out cold as their opinion that such a step would mean the massacre of a considerable number of young men who might be useful in their home towns.

So there was a good deal of discussion, and while they were in the midst of all this, Governor Richards got word from Sheriff John Ward, who had come to Salt Lake City with him, that Ward was leaving town on a confidential errand whose nature he could not divulge.

Sheriff Meets Outlaw

On the next day the sheriff returned and told the story of his journey to Wyoming's governor.

Butch Cassidy had sent for him. Complying with directions, he took the Denver and Rio Grande east-bound train in the afternoon and went to Soldiers' Summit, a lonely station consisting of a water-tank, a little depot, and some coal-sheds.

At the appointed hour that night Sheriff Ward struck out along the ridge until he reached the rendezvous, an open space among the gnarled old trees. Here was a log. He seated himself upon it, and Butch Cassidy came to him out of the darkness.

The two shook hands and they talked of bygones. Then the outlaw came down to business. He spoke of the conference of the governors, the talk of the militia, and the guards on the express-cars.

"You can tell the companies," said he, "to take their gunmen off the trains. They ain't going to need 'em. Nothing is going to come off, and you've got my word for that."

So Sheriff Ward told Wyoming's governor, and shortly afterward the conference adjourned *sine die*.

For the outlaws had gathered near Steamboat Springs to see if there were not some way by which they could enlist in Torrey's Rough Rider regiment that was being recruited at the time to go to Cuba.

That project of going to fight the Spaniards came to nothing. The chances

of arrest were too great, and all of them went back to robbery.

Two years or so after he met John Ward near Soldiers' Summit, Cassidy had occasion to send another message to a Colorado sheriff. A civil engineer by the name of Johnston, who was in the employ of the Department of the Interior surveying boundary lines for Indian reservations, was working with his party on the Uncompaghre plateau. One evening they camped at a cabin where Cassidy and several members of the Wild Bunch were stopping.

This man Johnston had met all manner of queer customers. The nature of his calling placed him in the rôle of a noncombatant. So he spent a pleasant evening with Butch Cassidy.

In the morning when the surveyors were about to depart, Cassidy called Johnston aside.

"Along about the time you're coming out of the narrow canyon five miles west of here," said he, "you'll meet up with the sheriff of Routt County and a posse. Tell 'em we know they're coming, and the best thing they can do is to turn back."

All of which came out as the outlaw had said it would, and the sheriff, being a man of common sense, followed the advice.

In those days Judge Powers of Salt Lake was one of the most widely known criminal lawyers in the whole West. He was sitting in his private office one morning when his stenographer entered.

"There's a man outside wishes to see you on business," she announced. "I asked him for his name, but he refused to give it."

Cassidy Consults Lawyer

Naturally Judge Powers was used to meeting men who were not over-anxious to proclaim their identity. So he bade the girl show the visitor in. The man seemed to be somewhere in his forties, although some of the lines on his big face might have come from hard living in the open and from whisky. His hair, which had been flaxen, was shot with gray; a rough-looking customer, dressed in overalls and a blue denim jumper.

He seated himself on the edge of an office chair, holding his battered hat in both hands, and fixed his blue eyes on Judge Powers. When the girl had closed the door behind her he demanded:

"Is what I say to you to go as a client consulting with his lawyer from now on?"

"You mean," Judge Powers countered, "a privileged communication?"

"That's it," said the visitor.

The lawyer gave his consent.

"All right, then," the man breathed deeply. "I'm Butch Cassidy."

Judge Powers stared at him for a moment, and then the humor of the situation struck him. He threw back his head and laughed long and loud. Cassidy grinned.

"Well," Judge Powers said when he had recovered his gravity, "what can I do for you?"

"I'll tell you," the outlaw answered quickly. "There's a heap of charges out against me and considerable money offered for me in rewards. And I'm getting sick of hiding out. Always on the run and never able to stay in one place. Now, when it comes to the facts, I've kept close track of things, and I know there ain't a man left in the country who can go on the stand and identify me for any crime. All of 'em have either died or gone away. And I've been thinking; why can't I just go and give myself up and stand trial on any of them old charges?"

Judge Powers sat silent for some time thinking it over; and at last he spoke.

"No use. You've robbed too many big corporations in your time. If you were ever to go to trial, those companies would bring somebody to the stand who'd swear against you. No. You'll have to keep on the run, I'm afraid."

Not many months after that visit Harvey Logan and several other members of the Wild Bunch robbed the Union Pacific passenger-train at dawn near Wilcox, Wyoming. They fled across the Laramie plains. At Teapot Rocks, some twenty-five miles from Casper, a posse overtook them and retreated after a hot fight. Twenty miles farther on Deputy Sheriff Joseph Hazen and a number of cowboys brought them to a stand in a rocky ravine. They slew the deputy, but the cowboys stuck to it and managed to cut them off from their horses.

After dark the outlaws broke through the cordon of their pursuers, stole the horses of a freight outfit and outdistanced the officers.

Robbers Meet at Cabin

Later the robbers met in a cabin at the crossing of the Little Muddy between Fort Washakie and Thermopolis. There they divided their loot, and Butch Cassidy was present when this took place.

Will Simpson, who had prosecuted him in Lander back in 1894, met the outlaw in a near-by town soon afterward and taxed him with having broken his promise to Governor Richards. But Cassidy assured him he had taken no part in the Wilcox robbery, and furthermore, had no intention of violating his word. He was, he said, planning to leave the United States, just as soon as he could make certain arrangements. It seems that he had come to the cabin at the crossing of the Little Muddy to confer with Harvey Logan and Harry Lonabaugh concerning that project.

At that time the Argentine was attracting many men from the vanishing ranges of the Rocky Mountain country. A number of cow-men and cowboys had gone thither from Texas as early as 1880; and after the Johnson County war quite a few Wyoming men had followed their example. There was a great deal of open country down in the Argentine, some of the best cattle country in the world; and there was no extradition treaty with our Government. The leaders of the Wild Bunch made up their minds to leave for Buenos Aires and take up life anew out on the great level pampas.

But things were beginning to happen too swiftly for them to carry out their plans just yet. Harvey Logan's brother Lonny was traced back to Dodson, Missouri, while he was making an Eastern visit, and was killed by a posse who surrounded the house where he was stopping. Bob Leigh, who had taken part in the Wilcox hold-up, was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to fifteen years in the penintentiary. Flat-Nosed George was slain by a Utah Sheriff near Green River. The Pinkerton detective agency had the names and descriptions of most of the outlaws. Rewards were offered for them. Operatives were nosing out their trails. Cassidy went into hiding. Harvey Logan got a number of his followers together and held up a Union Pacific train, but the express-car was empty when they opened it.

If the leaders wanted to go to South America, they were going to need more money than they had now. So Cassidy and Logan joined forces for the first time since the days before the former's arrest at Hames Fork, and took Harry Lonabaugh along with them to rob the First National Bank at Winnemucca, Nevada.

During the noon-hour on September 19, 1900, these three men, Cassidy, Logan, and Lonabaugh, rode into Winnemucca and tied their horses on a side street. The outlaws entered the front door, held up five men at the point of their revolvers, forced the cashier, George Nixon, to open the safe. After dumping thirty-two thousand dollars into an ore-sack, they took their victims into the back yard, where they lined them up along the building wall.

Bandits Escape With Loot

Now one of the robbers leaped a high blind fence into the alley. The others threw the money over to him and straightway followed him to their horses. While they were riding away Nixon and his companion ran back into the bank, secured a rifle, and might have made things lively for the fugitives, who were in full view, had not the cashier in his hurry jammed a cartridge in the magazine.

Within an hour a posse was on the trail. They followed it into the northeast. At Silva's ranch some thirty-odd miles out they learned that the outlaws were a scant hour ahead of them. They got a relay of horses and pressed on harder. Later they procured fresh mounts again, but after they had gone a hundred miles, with sometimes less than ten miles between them and the fugitives, the tracks of the outlaw's ponies vanished.

Two months later, while detective agencies were sending operatives all over the West and while the reward circulars were going to every sheriff's office beyond the Mississippi, the wanted trio met Ben Kilpatrick and Bob Carver, of the Wild Bunch, in San Antonio, Texas, and the five had a group photograph taken. That picture was to be a souvenir. After their next meeting, they planned to scatter to foreign lands. It shows them in their town clothes, with stiff hats tilted back on their heads.

Harvey Logan wears a nosegay in his buttonhole.

The five came together again in June of the next year in the Milk River country in northeastern Montana. With them was Camella Hanks. At Wagner, a little flag-station one hundred and ninety-six miles east of Great Falls, they held up the Great Northern westbound passenger at two o'clock in the afternoon. While they were blowing open the door of the express-car Sheriff Griffith of Great Falls leaped from the rear Pullman and opened fire on them.

A fusillade of rifle-shots sent him to cover and caused a number of the more curious among the passengers to duck back within the windows. A sheep-herder, who had been attracted by the noise, rode up close to see what was going on. One of the bandits killed his horse under him. Then the six swung into their saddles with something over forty thousand dollars in bills, which were consigned to a Helena bank.

Posses took their trail. The outlaws rode southward, sometimes less than fifteen miles ahead of their pursuers, to whom they sent jocular messages by such cowboys as they met on the way. When they had gone about one hundred and fifty miles they "put out" their trail by the old blanket trick and separated to rendezvous down in the Little Rockies, where they divided the loot.

Cassidy went to Alma, New Mexico, not far from the Mogollon Mountains, and awaited word from his companions. Under the name of Jim Lowe he bought a saloon and was doing well at selling whisky when an operative from a famous detective agency got wind of his hiding-place and came hither to investigate. The man, who was from the East, made the mistake of confiding his errand to two of the town's business men, one of whom happened to be the pseudo Jim Lowe.

Cassidy Saves Detective

There were several stock-rustlers and horse-thieves hiding in Alma at the time. When they got wind of the situation they took the detective prisoner. They were escorting him to the town limits, where it was their intention to hang him to a cottonwood limb. But Cassidy intervened and saved the life of the investigator, who left Alma without suspecting the identity of his preserver.

Meantime things had not been going so well with the rest of the Wild Bunch. Ben Kilpatrick was arrested in St. Louis, Missouri. Old Camella Hanks was taken somewhere in the south. Harvey Logan was captured in Tennessee. All three of them were sentenced to terms of varying lengths. Kilpatrick served his time and was afterward killed by an express messenger while holding up a train in Texas. Hanks made a spectacular escape in Knoxville and died a year later in a bloody battle with peace-officers down in San Antonio. Bob Carver was slain in a brawl in northern Mexico. Logan managed to bribe a guard in the Knoxville jail, while waiting to be taken to prison, and fled to the mountains on a saddle-horse.

Harry Lonabaugh had been lying quiet in a well-known sanitarium in Buffalo, New York. He and his wife were the first to leave America. They took a steamer down to Buenos Aires some time in 1902. Not long afterward Harvey Logan followed them. And at about the same time Cassidy went to Liverpool in a cattle-boat. Thence he made his way to the Argentine and joined his companions. It is in the lonely western pampas of that land that the story comes to its grim end.

The three men went to cattle-raising and were doing well. In those days the Government of the southern republic was still selling enormous tracts of range-land for a small figure. Labor was cheap and the great packing companies were beginning to establish freezing stations along the railroads and navigable rivers.

But it is hard to teach an old dog new tricks. The habit of raiding was in these men. And among the baggy-trousered *gauchos*—the cow-hands of the pampas—there were many hard characters who had formerly done a great deal of bush-whacking in various revolutions, with a bit of robbery every now and then between times. The American outlaws joined forces with these natives in one or two forays into Chile. At least Lonabaugh did. One day when he had returned to the little town on the eastern side of the Andes where he and the other Americans had been sojourning, a detachment of swarthy soldiers came after him. They surrounded the house.

Cassidy was in the place at the time. What had become of Logan has not been told, but he was absent and there is no authentic account of him from there on. When the military began firing on the building Lonabaugh was asleep. It was just at daybreak.

That was the situation. Cassidy looked forth and saw the soldiers closing in. Rifle in hand and loaded down with cartridges, he started to leave the building. He ran through the room where his old companion had been sleeping, and found him dead with a bullet through his body.

Butch Battles Soldiers

Cassidy leaped through a window and ran to a stone-walled corral one hundred yards or so away. He slipped through a cattle-chute that led from the main pen into a smaller inclosure. Here he took his stand and did his first killing of which record has come down.

There were more than one hundred soldiers. But the only entrance to the outlaw's stronghold was the narrow chute, with barely room for two men abreast. And when they had tried that route three or four times they gave it up. Then they charged the high walls, but those who reached the summit died in the instant of attainment. Their bodies lay drooped upon the barrier.

So it went on for all that day. Some time during the next morning Cassidy's ammunition ran low. The soldiers were not charging any longer now. They lay behind such cover as they could find, holding the corral encircled. Thus they remained all that day. On the next morning their officers determined on another advance.

This time they went by way of the main cattle-pen and on through the narrow chute. And when the first of them came into the smaller inclosure he uttered a loud shout, for Cassidy was lying dead.

They found him with his rifle beside him and in his hand his big single-action forty-five revolver. The last cartridge was discharged.

The bullet-hole in the center of his forehead testified as to the trueness of the aim.

So Cassidy died. The thing took place in 1906. By that time the automobile was beginning to make its appearance on the country roads of Wyoming and Colorado; the barbed-wire fences had inclosed the last remnants of the open ranges. The New West had come to take the place of the Old West. And the conditions that created the cowboy outlaws were gone forever.

When sheepherders and barbed-wire fences invaded Wyoming, when old-time cowboys and rustlers vanished and when civilization came to the badlands, it was—

THE LAST OF THE OPEN RANGES

as described by

FREDERICK R. BECHDOLT

IN THE NEXT ISSUE !

The man lay flat on his face. Gun ready, Spook Riley walked slowly toward him

Spur a

a novelet by

W. C. TUTTLE

Jaded Horse

Cowboy Spook Riley
and his pal Lonesome Lucas
make the range dance to law music
when rustlers and killers try to horn in!

I

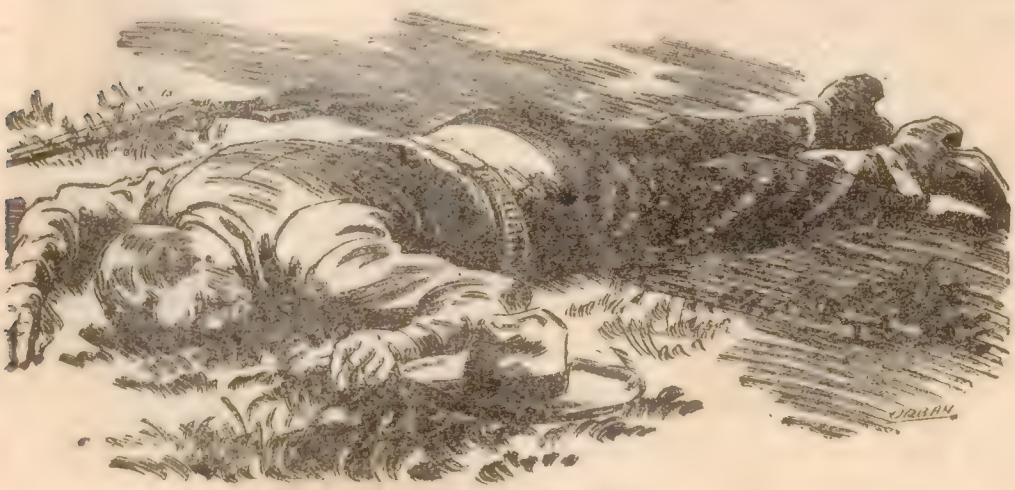
CHRISTENED Abernathy, by fond parents, the cowboy known as "Lonesome" Lucas, was snoring violently. Snoring was about the only thing that Lonesome did with any degree of vigor. "Spook" Riley sat up, glared at Lonesome, twisted off the bunk and held his head in his hands, hunched there, a picture of complete dejection. Finally he looked up. It was daylight, and he caught a reflection of himself in a broken mirror, nailed on the wall at the head of his bunk.

Spook was not exactly handsome when all was well, but now— His left eye was puffed and discolored, there was skin missing from his nose, one cheek and the point of his chin. There was a cut on the left side of his mouth, and as he moved carefully he was cognizant of painful ribs. That mirror did not reflect a pretty picture. Spook groaned hollowly and began rolling a cigarette.

Lonesome emitted a gurgling, choking snore, woke himself up and sat up, like a jack-in-a-box. He blinked at Spook thoughtfully, and said huskily, "You don't look any better than yuh did, when yuh went to bed, feller. You heal awful slow, seems to me."

"I feel fine," Spook said, while he flinched from sore ribs.

"Yeah?" queried Lonesome. "Feel fine, huh? With half yore ribs kicked loose, yuh feel jist like a mockin'-bird. That there is a right beautiful eye, too—like a black aig with a green yolk,



and I'm awful glad to find yuh feelin' fine, Mister Riley."

"I worked hard to get thisaway," said Spook, reaching for his high-heel boots.

"Yuh did, at that, feller," agreed Lonesome. "They say that fight lasted exactly forty minutes. Yuh know, Spook—yo're as crazy as a sheepherder, wastin' ability like that. Prize fighters git good money for fightin' half that hard, and half that long."

"They earn it," said Spook quietly.

"Yeah, I reckon they do, at that, Spook."

"Somebody ridin' up to the front," warned Spook. "Better take a look. It might be some of Scotty Nelson's friends."

It wasn't. The newcomers were both friendly with Spook and Lonesome. "It's Jack Doran and Peewee Robb," Lonesome said.

Lonesome invited them in, and they gazed with wonder at poor Spook Riley. After more than a cursory glance, Doran said:

"Hyah, Sheriff!"

"Wrong diagnosis," corrected Lonesome. "Scotty Nelson looks worse'n Spook does—if possible. This is Spook Riley, gents."

"Hyah, Sheriff," grinned Peewee. "Nice to see yuh."

"I'm in pretty bad shape," said Spook slowly, "but if you two rannihans don't stop miscallin' me, I'll—"

"The funny part of it is, Spook—we ain't miscallin' yuh."

"Huh? Peewee, if you make one more crack—"

PEEWEE held up his hands in mock surrender, but said:

"Set down, you bug-headed battler! Yuh better be settin' down, when yuh get the news. What day was yesterday?"

"Tuesday," said Spook.

"The man's right!" exclaimed Doran. "It was Tuesday. And what happened on last Tuesday, I'd ask yuh kindly?"

"Wait a minute!" blurted Lonesome. "Yesterday was election day! Spook, we forgot to vote!"

"Yeah, we did," nodded Spook. "Plumb forgot it."

"We want to git all the dates in order," explained Peewee. "On Monday you fought Mister Scotty Nelson, our estimable sheriff, all over the street of our fair city of Palo Seco. On Tuesday, all the folk of Thunder Butte Valley went to the polls to vote. All last night they counted votes. Come daylight, and this here announcement, Spook. With Scotty Nelson a one-to-twenty favorite to swamp Len Chadwick for the sheriff's office, enough bug-headed inhabitants of our fair valley wrote yore name on the ballots to elect you sheriff of this county."

Spook stared at Peewee for several moments and then said:

"Peewee, I can't figure out any reason for yuh to lie like that."

"He ain't lyin'," declared Doran. "You've done been elected sheriff, Spook. Allow me to be the first to shake yore hand."

"You try to shake my hand, and I'll shoot yuh!" snorted Spook. "Don't even try to shake any part of me—I'll come apart. Yo're both lyin', and yuh know it."

"We ain't lyin'," they declared in unison. "Judge Cole says it's perfectly legal. Yo're elected, feller. And may yuh rest in peace."

"Yore Majesty," said Lonesome quietly," shall I bring the horse liniment?"

"And a currycomb," replied Spook soberly. "I've got to get rid of my goose-pimples, before I can slide into my clothes."

"When you whipped Scotty Nelson, yuh turned the tide in yore favor," declared Doran.

"Tide?" snorted Spook. "I wasn't even a candidate. I never wanted the job and never asked for it. I don't want it. I don't see why they ever picked on me."

"Thunder Butte Valley likes a winner," said Peewee. "You done whipped Scotty Nelson to the queen's taste, and Scotty has been the stud-buzzard in these parts for years. Yuh made him quit, Spook. It was the greatest fight ever seen in these parts. You fought him square, even if he didn't fight on the square. The people appreciate yuh, Spook. That is, all except Scotty Nelson and 'Mule' Higgins."

"Higgins lost twenty thousand dollars," grinned Doran. "He made bets that Nelson would be the next sheriff, and gave odds of twenty to one. Well, ain't yuh grateful to the voters?"

"No," replied Spook, "I ain't—they're crazy."

Spook Riley didn't want to be sheriff. All he wanted was to find out who was

stealing his cattle. Spook and Lonesome owned the 44 spread, slowly building it up, working hard. Spook's uncle died in St. Paul, and left Spook twenty thousand dollars, which Spook immediately invested in Mexican calves. That amount of money bought a lot of calves, and the 44 was doing fine. But something was happening to the 44. Ninety percent of their yearlings had faded out of the picture.

To cap things off, Spook had been arrested for venting a Box X on the right hip of a yearling, and running his own 44 on the animal's left side. The evidence was so crude that Judge Cole, realizing that Spook was too smart to do a thing like that, threw the case out for lack of evidence. It helped to build up Spook's hatred of Mule Higgins and his outfits, and did not serve to build up any love between Spook Riley and the big sheriff, Scotty Nelson.

They had met on the main street of Palo Seco, passed a few words anent the ancestry of each, and went to work on each other. Nelson was twenty pounds heavier than Spook, and reputed the best rough-and-tumble fighter in the whole country, but Spook, with his lanky frame, long, muscular arms, and a decided love of battle, had soundly whipped the big sheriff. In fact, Nelson had been unable to travel under his own power, after the forty-minute melee, and admitted through broken teeth and bloody lips, that he was whipped.

HARRISON EDWARD HIGGINS, known as "Mule", owned most of Palo Seco, owned the Rocking R, the Box X and the HEH. Higgins was the richest man in the country, but he never had enough money to buy the 44. And he particularly wanted the 44, because of the water. Lonesome swore that Higgins was behind the rustling of the 44 cattle, because he wanted to break them. Higgins swore that Spook and Lonesome were stealing his stock. He said that his HEH brand was losing heavily.

Higgins was also the political boss of the valley, but this election proved that he had opposition. Scotty Nelson was his choice for sheriff, and also as a son-in-law. Spook Riley also thought that Mary Higgins was the finest girl on earth, and he wanted to build up the 44 to a point where Mule Higgins might agree to him seeing Mary. Higgins was a tough man to deal with.

Spook was twenty-five, while Mary was nineteen. She was nice to Spook, but not nice enough to give him any great hopes for the future. Scotty Nelson was handsome, had some money, and a big pull with Mule Higgins, but was twenty years Mary's senior.

Spook was barely able to ride a horse to town, but he and Lonesome decided that they needed more information. Spook limped ahead of Lonesome into Judge Cole's office, where the elderly jurist looked them over with a certain degree of amusement.

"We've received some kinda queer news, Judge," Spook said. "We came to see you about it."

"Oh, yes," answered the judge. "Congratulations, Spook. For a man who was not a registered candidate, did not campaign, nor even know what the voters had in mind, you ran well ahead of both candidates. Some forty-odd votes ahead, I believe. At least, far enough ahead to forestall any idea of a recount."

"I'm a fine lookin' sheriff, Judge."

"I will admit that you do not look any too active, Spook. But, as far as I can hear, you are much better physically than the incumbent. He hasn't, if my information is correct, been out of bed since Monday. And I missed the whole fight."

"I wish I had," sighed Spook. "Well, what can be done about it, Judge? I don't want the job."

Judge Cole shook his head slowly. "You better take it, Spook. After all, it's a good office, and I believe you will make a good sheriff. Just between me and you, this county needs a good sheriff. Now, don't get me wrong, Spook. Scotty Nelson has been a good sheriff, as far as I know, but we all know that his office has been dominated by Higgins. That isn't right. I'm sure that Mr. Higgins will not try to influence you in any way."

"If I thought he would try it, Judge, I'd love the job."

Judge Cole smiled. "Take it anyway. If you don't like it, you can gracefully resign later. I'm sure that Lonesome can take care of the ranch."

"What's left of it," amended Lonesome. "C'mon, Spook."

"Better take the job, Spook," insisted the judge. "The folks of this valley wanted you, or they wouldn't have written your name on the ballots. And just a

little gossip, my boy. I was told that when Mule Higgins heard the news, he swore you wouldn't last more than a week. He figures you lost him a lot of money."

"A week, eh?" said Spook slowly. "I'll take the job, Judge. Maybe I won't even last a week—but I'll be the sheriff as long as I last."

II

SPOOK had been sheriff two whole days, and just now he had a pile of papers on his desk, looking them over, trying to figure out what they all meant. There had been no one to explain all or any of the details to Spook. Lonesome was at the ranch, and Spook hadn't appointed a deputy yet. He wanted to give Lonesome the job, but was at a loss to find someone to run the 44.

Someone stepped into the doorway of the office, and Spook turned to see Mule Higgins, looming big in the doorway. In spite of his wealth, Mule Higgins always wore range clothes, ignored haircuts and always needed a shave. He and Spook eyed each other, like strange bulldogs. It was the first time Spook had seen Higgins since election.

"Well, Riley, how is the new job?" asked Higgins, trying to make his tone friendly.

"I like it," replied Spook quietly.

"Good! You're a smart young man, Riley."

Higgins came on into the office and leaned on the desk, lowering his voice.

"With my help you can go a long way, my boy," he said. "I have influence—and you've got ambition. With me behind yuh—"

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Spook. "You mean that I'm to throw in with you and—oh, no, Higgins. The voters didn't like the way you ran this office. If yuh don't mind, I'll run it my way."

"I see-e-e," mused Higgins coldly. "You don't need help."

"I don't need yore help. After all, it didn't get a thing for Scotty Nelson. I hear you've put him in charge of all the Higgins ranches."

"It got him that much—a better job than bein' sheriff."

"Then you go right back and help him run the job there. I'll run this office. You and yore men tried to frame me for rustlin'. It didn't work. I beat yore pet out of his job, and you come to me, lyin' yore heart out, tryin' to get control of this office again. Well, you ain't goin' to get it—not as long as I'm the sheriff."

Mule Higgins laughed shortly and turned to the doorway, where he faced Spook.

"Listen, Riley—I own this valley," he said huskily. "I'll put you out of business, and I'll make you quit this office. I'll have my own man in here in less than a month."

"Yuh're extendin' the time, eh?" remarked Spook. "I heard you said I wouldn't last a week. Much obliged for the warnin'. I'll have both eyes open, Higgins."

Higgins went away, and Spook sank back in his chair, realizing that his chances of fighting the Higgins outfit were very, very small. If he had been smart he would have accepted Higgins' offer. But Spook Riley wasn't smart—he was stubborn. He knew that Tom Heffner, the prosecuting attorney, was a Higgins man. In fact, most of the elected men in that county were men who had been backed by Higgins. Spook's election was just one of those things that sometimes happen.

A little later in the afternoon, Spook met Mary Higgins on the street. Spook tried to sidestep the meeting by going into a store, but discovered that it was a storeroom, which had not been occupied for a year, the door nailed shut. Mary seemed amused at Spook, who was embarrassed.

"Trying to dodge me, Spook?" she asked.

"No, I—well, I wasn't, but I didn't know if—well?"

"Well, what?" she said flatly.

"After what happened, yuh know." Spook didn't seem to have any place to put his hands. "Yuh see, I—yore father—"

Mary laughed, and Spook grinned foolishly.

"I think it is wonderful, Spook," he heard her say.

"Yes'm, it is—kinda. I didn't know you'd—well, yeah, it shore is wonderful. Yuh see, yore father don't like it!"

"He wouldn't," she smiled. "Dad wants to boss everybody. He made some foolish bets, and when you take money away from Dad, he gets upset. Don't let that bother you, Spook. His bark is a lot worse than his bite."

"I hope so, Mary. I felt kinda sorry for Scotty Nelson and—"

"No, Spook; let's be honest—you weren't sorry."

"That's right—I wasn't."

They looked soberly at each other, and Mary said:

"Do you know what I wish, Spook?"

"What, Mary?" he asked quickly.

"I wish I could have seen that fight."

"Shucks!" blurted Spook. "It wasn't much to see, I don't reckon. Just a couple blamed fools."

Mary laughed quietly. "I've heard it was a battle. I have also heard that you won't last as sheriff, Spook. Go ahead and fool them. I'm on your side. Don't quit."

MIGHTY strange words, coming from one of the Higgins clan. Spook was afraid to look at her. He dug his hands in his pockets and rubbed one boot thoughtfully on the wooden sidewalk.

"Figgerin' it thataway," he said quietly, "I reckon I'll be sheriff for a long time, Mary."

Spook's talk with Mary Higgins lifted his spirits sky high, and he rode back to the ranch, with a song in his heart—if not on his lips. Spook was not musical.

There was no one around the old ranchhouse, as Spook rode in and started for the stable. But something told him to take a look at the house first. It was the first time he had not put his horse up, before going to the house. He dropped his reins and walked up on the porch. Everything seemed quiet around the place. Two loose horses wandered around the corrals, some mongrel chickens scratched in the dirt, just away from the porch.

Spook flung the door open. For a moment he was unable to see much in there, because of the darkness. He stepped inside. In an old chair beside a rough table was Lonesome Lucas, bound and gagged, staring at Spook. All this was very amazing to Spook, who just stood there, trying to realize that Lonesome was a prisoner.

Then he heard the rasp of boot soles on gravel, and whirled around. A man had come into view, coming from the direction of the stable, traveling fast. He had a shotgun in his hands, and fairly skidded to a stop, swinging the gun to his shoulder. Spook had drawn his forty-five, and the man was still trying to catch his balance, when Spook fired.

The man fired, too—fired both barrels of the shotgun, but the shot merely smashed against the weathered boards of the house above the porch. That forty-five bullet had knocked him backwards, and now he dropped the gun and went flat on his face. Slowly Spook went out on the porch, gun ready. But the man did not move.

Spook went down, picked up the shotgun and pulled a six-shooter from the man's holster. Spook tossed the guns aside and turned the man over. He was about six feet tall, skinny, with a sharp, ferretlike face and a turkey neck. He needed a haircut and a shave, and, most of all, a bath. Spook had never seen the man before.

Spook went back into the house and released Lonesome. The gag was made from a dishcloth, none too clean, and Lonesome spat painfully. The gag had slowed down his vocal ability, but he made it up in whispered profanity.

"What happened?" asked Spook flatly.

"Why, that hatchet-faced, rat-minded, skunk-smellin'—"

"Who is he?" asked Spook.

"I dunno," wheezed Lonesome. "Never seen him before. He jist wandered in, stuck me up, and tied me to a chair. Said I'd be all right, if I didn't start anythin'. Said he'd meet you at the stable. Dad blame yuh, I died seven times, when I seen yuh out of the winder, headin' for the stable. I couldn't stop yuh. How come yuh to look in here first?"

"I dunno," admitted Spook. "Mebbe I'm gettin' lucky. Let's go and take a look at this whipoorwill."

"Dead, huh?"

"I ain't shore—but he looks it."

They looked the man over and decided that he was not dead. In fact, he opened his eyes and cursed both of them, weakly, but with fair continuity. Lonesome secured an old tarpaulin and they carried him into the house. He was deaf and dumb to any and all questions.

"Lonesome, you saddle up and go get Doc Adams," Spook said at last. "I'll try and get along with him, until yuh get back."

Lonesome lost no time in saddling his horse and galloping away from the ranch. The wounded man sank into a coma. Spook went out on the old porch

and leaned against a porch-post. It was a fine beginning for a new sheriff. He had no doubt that this man was one of Higgins' hired gunmen—hired especially to make a vacancy in the sheriff's office.

Spook's horse was standing between the house and the stable, so he walked out, picked up the reins and took the animal down to the stable. As he opened the big door and started inside, a bullet smashed into the side of the door, showering splinters all over Spook. The horse jerked loose, whirled away, and Spook dived inside, kicking the door shut, just as another bullet cut a nice, round hole through the door, about three feet above him.

"This deal," Spook told the wide world, "ceases to be funny."

OUT there in the brush, someone was using a rifle, and, judging from the sound of the shots, they were not less than two hundred yards away, which was much too far for Spook to try and retaliate with a six-gun.

Spook moved quickly away from the door and sat down on the oat-box to think things over. He was sure that whoever they were, they would not make a direct assault on the stable. It was a big stable, and after the door was shut they would have no idea just where Spook would be located. However, after he had arrived at that conclusion, a bullet came through the wall, knocked a horsecollar off a wall-peg, and another splintered the side of a stall. Spook immediately climbed up into the almost empty loft and sprawled on some loose hay.

Through the hay-hole he could watch the road to Palo Seco. He knew it would require at least an hour for Lonesome to bring Doctor Adams back with him. Maybe, by that time, the bushwhackers would get tired of shooting holes in the stable. Spook hoped so. He didn't particularly like to be shot at.

After a while he thought he heard another shot, but it sounded quite far away. Spook slid over to the hay-hole and rolled a smoke. He couldn't see the ranchhouse from there, but he could see quite a lot of the surrounding country. He saw Doctor Adams and Lonesome coming toward the ranch, both riding in Doc's buggy, leading Lonesome's horse.

Spook went down the ladder and flung the stable door open, as the two men drove up to the house. Spook ran swiftly up to them, but there was no shooting. In a few terse sentences he told them what had happened, and they all went into the ranchhouse. Spook and Lonesome stood back, while the doctor made his examination, which was very brief.

"Lonesome, you told me this man talked with you," the medico said.

"Well, it was mostly profanity, Doc."

"That's remarkable, to say the least."

"What do yuh mean, Doc?" asked Spook curiously.

"I mean that this man was shot through the heart, and—wait a minute! This man has been shot twice!"

Doctor Adams had thrown back the man's shirt, disclosing a bullet hole in his left shoulder. Spook and Lonesome leaned close, staring at the two wounds. Spook said, "Why, Doc, I only shot once, and—wait a minute! Look, Doc! There's burns around that other one! Somebody—" Spook stepped back, staring at the body.

"Somebody done what?" asked Lonesome.

"They drove me into the stable," said Spook quickly. "While they cooped me up in there, somebody got in here and shot him. Blast their hides, they was afraid he'd talk!"

"Yes," admitted the doctor, "that fatal shot was fired at close range. A smaller bullet, too."

"That back winder is open!" exclaimed Lonesome. "That was shut."

"Yuh don't have to be smart to figger out that deal," said Spook. "This feller was hired to blast me, when I went to the stable, but I went to the house. He tried to get me, while I was unropin' Lonesome, but missed. The men who hired him to kill me was watchin' to see the job done, and when he failed, they drove me undercover and killed him. They didn't dare let him talk."

"Who hired him?" asked the doctor.

"Do yuh have to have a crystal ball to guess that one, Doc?" queried Spook. "Mule Higgins swore he'd have me out of office in a week."

The elderly doctor shook his head slowly. "I can't believe that of Higgins, he said. "It is just a little too crude for a man like Higgins, Spook. Anyway, you should have more evidence, before

you make accusations like that."

"Yeah, I reckon yuh're right, Doc. But who else would want to kill me?"

"I don't care to even guess," replied the doctor, "but I hope you find out."

"Did yuh ever see this feller before, Doc?" asked Lonesome.

Doctor Adams shook his head. "I don't believe I ever did," he replied. "Someone in town may recognize him."

"Mule Higgins, for instance," suggested Lonesome.

The doctor shrugged. He wasn't going to commit himself.

NOR did anyone in Palo Seco. Dozens of men went to look at the body, but no one admitted recognition. Even Mule Higgins came and looked. He didn't dare not to, after all the talk in town.

Everyone knew that Higgins had sworn to put Spook Riley out of office. He brought Sam Slade, manager of the HEH, along with him to view the remains. Sam was a tall, poker-faced person, hard as nails. Men said that Sam was a gunman, fast as a rattler, but his skill had never been demonstrated in Thunder River Valley. He looked at the body, grinned at Spook, and walked out, followed by Mule Higgins, who didn't even look at Spook.

Spook was still at the doctor's place, when Judge Cole and Tom Heffner, the prosecuting attorney, came in. Heffner nodded to Spook, and came in closer, looking at the body. He said:

"I never saw him before." Judge Cole looked closely at the face of the dead man, nodded shortly and turned to Spook.

"His name," he said quietly, "was Bob Miller. About six years ago he was tried for stealing horses at Yuma. I presided at the trial, and I sent him up for ten years. Congratulations on shooting quick, Spook. The man was no good."

"Thanks, Judge. Now, I'd like to know who hired him to shoot me."

"Dead men tell no tales," smiled the prosecutor.

"That was their theory, too," said Spook. "Still, yuh never can tell. But, Judge, if you sent him up for ten years, six years ago, what's he doin' here?"

"You have heard of parole, I'm sure. Well, it isn't always the best thing. However, it might help us to find out where he came from."

As Spook and Lonesome rode out to the ranch that evening, Lonesome said, "How do yuh write out a resignation?"

"I don't know," replied Spook.

"Yuh better learn, feller. It'd be a lot nicer on paper than on a tombstone. I'll never forgit, settin' there, all tied up, seein' you ridin' past, headin' for that stable—and a shotgun."

"It was close," admitted Spook, "but close only counts in pitchin' horseshoes, Lonesome. Yuh know what we're goin' to do? We're goin' to hire a man to run this spread."

"Huh?" Lonesome looked sharply at Spook. "Meanin' what?"

"Yuh're goin' to be my deputy."

"Aw-w-w, Spook! I'd be a terrible deputy! Why, I ain't even law-abidin', and you know it."

"Neither am I—and I'm the sheriff."

"Don't brag and knock wood, when yuh say that."

"Lonesome, I need a man behind me, who won't run, when trouble breaks."

"Aw, it ain't a case of bravery on my part, Spook—it's rheumatiz—or fear. My legs fill up with rubber. But who can we get to run the ranch?"

"I can get 'High Pockets' Jones. He ain't workin'."

"Well, all right," sighed Lonesome. "I knowed it would happen sooner or later."

"What would happen sooner or later?"

"Havin' to buy a new shirt."

III

THE inquest over the body of Bob Miller was held next day in the courthouse, presided over by Doctor Adams. It was Spook's first experience of this kind, and he was not much help. Lonesome was the first witness, and testified as to what happened to him, and what Miller had said.

Spook described what happened, but was unable to say just why he went to the house, instead of to the stable. Doctor Adams testified as to the cause of death, and said that, except for the assassin's bullet, Miller had a good chance to live.

Mule Higgins was at the inquest, as was Sam Slade, foreman of the HEH, and Randy Akers, foreman of the Rocking R. When he sold the Rocking R to

Higgins, Akers stayed on as ramrod. Spook liked Akers.

The coroner's jury of six men decided on the spot that Spook shot in self defense, while Miller was trying to murder him, and closed the case, as far as the law was concerned. Higgins had no comments, but rode away with Slade and Akers. Judge Cole met Spook on the street and drew him aside.

"I sent a wire to the penitentiary," explained the judge, "and I got an immediate reply. Miller was paroled, and his last report showed that he was working for the Cassell outfit, over near Green Bluff. The sheriff over there answered my wire, and gave me that report. He hadn't seen Miller for several weeks."

"Well, much obliged, Judge," said Spook. "Mebbe I can find out more. At least, we know where he's been workin'."

Green Bluff was across the range and about a hundred miles from Palo Seco, as the crow flies. But Spook was no crow. He'd have to travel further. Lonesome said, "You ain't thinkin' of goin' over there, are yuh?"

"Well," replied Spook, " I shore won't find out what I want to know, settin' around here, dodgin' buckshot."

FORTY-EIGHT hours later Spook Riley was riding alone down a narrow road in the Green Bluff country. He had never been over there before, and had no legal authority in that county. He did not wear the insignia of his office, and did not want to be recognized. At Green Bluff he had asked and received directions to the Cassell ranch, where he hoped to find out where Bob Miller had gone from there.

The ranchhouse of the Cassell spread was a rambling, old house, with numerous out-buildings, a huge stable, corrals and the usual impedimenta connected with cattle raising. Spook rode his tired horse into the place, where a man called to him.

This man was of middle-age, grizzled, hard-eyed, as he came up to Spook, looking him over closely.

"Hyah, pardner. My name's Jim Smith," Spook began.

"That's all right," said the man. "I'm Tex Cassell. Are yuh travelin', or goin' some place, Smith?"

Spook eased himself in the saddle and reached for his papers and tobacco. "Jist driftin'," he said. "I heard in Green Bluff that Bob Miller was workin' out here. I'm a friend of his'n."

Tex Cassell frowned thoughtfully. "Bob Miller?" he asked. "I can't quite place him."

"Mebbe not," agreed Spook, shaping his cigarette carefully. "Yuh see, Mr. Cassell, mebbe three, four weeks after this a man will come along here and say, 'I'm lookin' for a feller named Bill Jones, or Henry Brown. You won't know him either, 'cause you've only met Jim Smith."

"Yeah, that's right," admitted Cassell. "You can't shoot a man for callin' hisself what he wants to. Shove that ga'nted bronc in the stable and hang up the hull. We'll have supper in a hour or so. Mebbe some of the boys remember—what'd yuh say his name was?"

"Bob Miller."

"Oh, yeah, Bob Miller. What sort of a lookin' hombre is he?"

Spook thought fast. It was apparent that Cassell was lying. He knew Miller, and Spook knew there would be no chance to get information from Cassell.

"Well, he's red-headed, about five feet, six, one eye jist a little off center, and bowlegged," Spook said.

Cassell shook his head. "I don't reckon I know the gent," he said. "One of the boys at the stable will show yuh where to put yore *caballo*."

Spook's description was as far from a description of Bob Miller as possible for Spook to concoct at a moment's notice. A man at the stable tied Spook's horse in a stall and fed it some hay, while Spook hung up his saddle. The man was not a bit talkative, so Spook offered no explanation as to who he was nor why he came.

He found a shady place on the front porch and sat down. No one came near him. He could see that the Cassell outfit was quite a spread. At least a dozen riders checked in about sundown, and a dozen riders is a sizeable outfit, except at roundup time.

Without any introductions Spook took a place at the long table and ate supper. There was little conversation, and the tired riders ate wolfishly. Tex Cassell did not eat with them.

After supper a number of the cowpokes saddled their horses, and Spook heard one of them mention that

there was a dance at Green Bluff. Spook saw Cassell talking with one of the men, who came to Spook and said, "There's an extra bunk in the bunkhouse, and yuh're welcome to it, Smith. My name's Garey."

Spook thanked him. "Are you ramroddin' this spread, Garey?"

"No. Tex ramrods his own outfit; I'm his *segundo*."

"From the size of the outfit yuh're runnin' lots of cows."

"Yeah, we cover a lot of territory, Smith. Tex tells me yuh're lookin' for a feller named Bob Miller."

"Well, not in particular," replied Spook. "I used to know him, and I heard he was here. You know how it is."

Garey nodded thoughtfully. "Names don't mean much, Smith."

"That's right. If I don't locate him there'll be nobody hurt."

"Well, make yoreself at home. We usually have a four-bit poker game in the bunkhouse—if yuh feel lucky."

"Four-bits is about my size," answered Spook and grinned.

Tex Cassell went to town, too, leaving Garey and four of the men, known as Lee, Ike, Tony and Hap. Spook did not take a chair in the poker game, having no liking for a six-handed game of draw, but after an hour or so, Ike quit and went to bed. Spook took his place, and the game went on.

It was more of a pastime with them than gambling. Spook was two dollars ahead of the game when they heard a horse come up near the bunkhouse. Garey went over and opened the door. It was very dark outside, and they heard a man call, "Hyah, Garey? This is Scotty."

"Scotty Nelson!" said Hap, and they all turned toward the open doorway, when Spook struck the lamp with his elbow and plunged the bunkhouse into complete darkness.

And as he knocked the lamp off the table, Spook slid aside, edging toward the doorway, only a few feet away.

"Hey! What happened to the lamp?" Garey said. "Light it, will yuh? Come on in, Scotty. We'll have a light in a minute."

Spook felt a man rub past him, and stepped outside. The men were trying to find the lamp, or light a candle. The saddled horse was only a few feet from the bunkhouse. Spook went into the saddle and moved away slowly. It was too dark for them to have seen him fifty feet away.

He found the main gate. Someone was yelling something about the missing horse. Spook got off the horse, found a mesquite snag and tied him quickly. Then he hurried back toward the stable listening to the voices, as they also went in that direction. Spook came in against the rear of the big building, where wide cracks made it possible to hear what was being said.

Someone lighted a lantern, and he heard one man say:

"No, his horse and saddle are still here. He got Scotty's horse." Another one said, "Well, we can't do anythin' in the dark. What went wrong with him, anyway?"

They all trooped back to the bunkhouse. Spook opened the stable doors, untied his horse, hooked his saddle under one arm and got out of there as quietly as possible. Out in the open, he saddled quickly, swung into his saddle and rode out the main gate, where he untied Scotty Nelson's horse, tied up the reins and started it back toward the house.

Back in the lighted bunkhouse the boys tried to give Nelson a description of Spook Riley, but each one made it more confusing. Finally Garey said, "Well, mebbe he don't look like any of the pictures the boys has painted for yuh. All I can add is that he's got a scab on his left cheek, one on his nose, and it looked like one had just came off his chin. He's also had a cut on the left side of his mouth, almost healed now. And he told Tex that Bob Miller was a friend of his, and he's lookin' for him."

Scotty Nelson got to his feet and said to Garey:

"Can yuh furnish me a horse? I'm goin' to Green Bluff to see Tex."

"Why, shore," agreed Garey. "Hap, throw a hull on that gray, will yuh? If yore horse shows up, Scotty, we'll stable him."

"Much obliged," said Scotty shortly, and walked out.

LONESOME wasn't getting any pleasure out of being in charge of the sheriff's office in Palo Seco. Each morning he opened the office and just sat there, waiting for Spook to return—with no assurance that he would ever

return. High Pockets Jones had taken over the 44. He was nearly seven feet of tobacco-chewing manhood, and so thin that Lonesome had said, "If his j'ints ever stiffen we'd use him for a fish-pole."

High Pockets knew all about cattle rustlers. He told Lonesome:

"I ain't never met one of them there sticky-ropes that I couldn't run into the ground. The trouble with you folks, yuh don't git scientific enough. Keep yore gun and handcuffs oiled, 'cause I'll have 'em in my toils awful quick."

Lonesome took all this with a grin and a grain of salt. He knew High Pockets very well. But Lonesome wasn't interested in High Pockets' detective ability. He wanted Spook to come back and take over the duties of that doggone office. He saw Mary Higgins and she asked him where Spook had gone. Lonesome merely waved vaguely and told her he'd gone some'ers, and he'd be much obliged if somebody could tell him.

Lonesome had just opened the office that morning, when Dud McFee and Ed Welch, two of the Rocking R riders, rode up to the little hitch-rack and dismounted quickly. These two usually came to town with a grin, but this time they were grim. McFee said, "Lonesome, you know High Pockets Jones, don't yuh?"

"After about seven, eight years—yeah. He's runnin' the Forty-Four for me and Spook."

"He *was*," amended McFee.

"Huh?" grunted Lonesome. "Meanin' what, Dud?"

McFee gestured vaguely. "There's an old trail between the Rockin' R and the HEH, Lonesome. Piled up beside that trail, between the two ranches, is High Pockets Jones."

"Dead, yuh mean?" asked Lonesome huskily.

The two men nodded slowly. "Looks awful dead t' me," said Welch. "I liked High Pockets, too, Lonesome. Been shot in the back."

"In the back, huh?" said Lonesome. "Ol' High Pockets!"

"Spook ain't here, eh?" queried McFee.

"Ain't back yet. You boys wait here and I'll git the coroner. You'll have to take us back to the body, I reckon."

While Lonesome went to get the doctor, McFee and Welch sat down in front of the office. A lone rider on a weary horse came down the main street, and they recognized Spook Riley. He drew up in front of the office and got off his horse.

"Howdy, gents," he said wearily. "How's everythin'?"

"Not so good, Spook," replied McFee. "Lonesome has gone to find Doctor Adams."

"Doc Adams? What's gone wrong, Dud?"

"Me and Ed found High Pockets Jones this mornin', Spook. He's beside that trail between the Rockin' R and the HEH."

Spook looked bleakly at them for several moments. "Yuh mean he's dead, Dud?" he asked huskily.

McFee nodded. "Shot in the back, Spook. Looks like a soft-nose thirty-thirty," Dud said.

Spook leaned against the hitch-rack and began rolling a cigarette. He hadn't eaten since last night, and he didn't want the cigarette, but he had to do something. Lonesome and the doctor were coming down the street. Spook threw the unfinished quirly away and went to meet them. There was no greeting between Spook and Lonesome.

"Give me time to drink a cup of coffee, will yuh?" asked Spook.

"No great hurry," answered Lonesome. "The boys say he's dead."

The sight of Old High Pockets, piled up in the brush and weeds made Spook a bit sick. A rifle bullet had struck him squarely between the shoulders, and the doctor said he never knew what hit him. But Spook wasn't shot at that spot. There was no blood on the weeds nor dirt. They found his saddled horse at the ranch, the saddle smeared with blood, indicating that the body had been roped to the saddle.

UNDOUBTEDLY the murder of High Pockets Jones would awaken the Palo Seco folks to the fact that things were not exactly right. Some of them tried to find out where Spook Riley had been, but to no avail. Spook was tight-lipped. The inquest was merely a formality. Mule Higgins knew what men were saying. He had said that he would put Spook Riley out of office, and High Pockets Jones had been working for Spook.

Randy Akers, ramrod of the Rocking R, came to Spook at the office. Randy was the one man in Higgins' outfit that Spook liked. Spook knew Randy before Higgins bought the Rocking R, and he felt that Randy would never be a party to any dirty work that Higgins wanted done.

"Spook, I don't like the talk in town," Randy said. "I work for Higgins, but I don't shoot for no man. High Pockets was killed between the Rockin' R and the HEH. No, I don't mean that you've done any talkin'—'cause yuh ain't."

"No, I ain't talked, Randy," agreed Spook. "I can't help what other men say. When I find out who murdered High Pockets, I'll have my little talk. Yuh're the only man in Higgins' outfit I can call my friend."

"Thank yuh, Spook. I appreciate that. I liked High Pockets, too, and I'd like to help pull a rope on the man who murdered him. I jist hope it ain't any of my gang."

"I hope not, Randy. I've got a tough job here. I didn't want it, but here I am. I can trust Judge Cole and I can trust Lonesome Lucas. Now, I'm shore I can trust you. But that only makes three of us, Randy. Even the prosecutin' attorney, who is supposed to work with me, keeps away and don't offer me friendship nor advice. My herd of cows is all shot. I'd have a hard time pickin' out one to eat. Mule Higgins said he'd put me out of business, and he has almost made good."

"I reckon yuh're right, Spook," said Randy. "I've had my boys check on the Forty-Four brands, and the report is that they're mighty few. I wanted to get some ideas of my own, Spook—but I ain't found no solution yet."

Spook leaned back in his office chair and put his boots on the desk. "Randy, the Rockin' R was the first spread that Higgins bought, wasn't it?" he asked.

"No, the Box X was the first one. Then he took the Rafter B and threw it in with the Box X. After that he bought the Rockin' R. The last one was the old JK, and a little over a year ago they changed the JK to the HEH. Sam Slade worked out that brand and Higgins had it registered. Sam wanted him to change all the brands to the HEH, but Higgins never done it."

Spook nodded thoughtfully. "Randy did you ever meet Tex Cassell, of the Cassell Cattle Company, over at Green Bluff?"

Randy shook his head. "No, I never did. I've heard that they're runnin' a lot of cows over there. Do you know him?"

Spook didn't say. He ignored the question.

"Higgins told me that Scotty Nelson is in charge of all the Higgins spreads," Spook said.

"Yeah, I think so, Spook. Higgins told me that I'd take orders from Scotty. I told him I would, as long as the orders suited me. Mebbe I'll be lookin' for a job pretty soon. Higgins thinks that the sun rises and sets in that handsome hombre. Well, I've got to get goin', Spook. Good luck to yuh, feller."

"Thank yuh, Randy."

Randy Akers walked to the doorway, but stopped and looked back.

"If anythin' happens—and yuh need me, Spook—"

"I'll remember that, Randy, and I'm much obliged."

Spook walked up to a little restaurant and met Mule Higgins at the doorway. The big cattleman seemed to have lost his overbearing attitude, looked years older. Spook said, "Howdy," and started into the restaurant.

"Riley!" Higgins called.

Spook turned and came back, looking curiously at Higgins, who moved out closer to the edge of the wooden sidewalk.

"Riley, do you think I had anythin' to do with the shootin' of High Pockets Jones?" Higgins asked now.

Spook looked at him closely, as he replied:

"I haven't said that, Higgins."

"You think it, don't yuh?"

"A man has a right to his own thoughts, Higgins. At least, that is one thing you can't control in this valley."

Higgins nodded slowly. "I've found that out," he said bitterly. "I don't want to control any man's thoughts, Riley—but I want to tell yuh that High Pockets was not killed by me nor on my order. Blast it man, I'm no murderer! Why would I kill him?"

Spook smiled grimly. "That's a question you'll have to answer, Higgins. Nobody can put the deadwood on yuh for it, unless one of yore hired gunmen talks too much."

Higgins winced at the implied accu-

sation. "Riley, I believe you have the ability to be a great sheriff!" Higgins opined. "But you'll have to learn to not accuse people, until you have evidence."

"Have I accused you, Higgins?"

"I feel that you have. I have no hired gunmen. People are sayin' that Scotty Nelson is my bodyguard. Riley, I can only stand just so much—"

"Higgins, do you know Tex Cassell, over at Green Bluff?"

"Tex Cassell? No, I don't know him. I know there is a Tex Cassell, but I have never met him. What's he got to do with this?"

"Oh, I just wondered if yuh knew him."

They looked at each other for several moments, trying to read each others thoughts. Then Higgins spoke:

"You've changed a lot, Riley—bitter as they come."

"Why not?" flared Spook. "I bought twenty thousand dollars worth of young stock from Mexico. It's all gone—along with all the rest of my stock. You wanted the Forty-Four, Higgins—wanted it for the water. You said you'd get it. I didn't want to sell it. I wanted to be a cowman myself. I'm busted—flat. But I can tell yuh this much—the Forty-Four ain't for sale."

"I'm sorry," said Higgins.

"Sorry I won't sell the Forty-Four?" asked Spook.

"No," replied Higgins, and walked away.

Spook stood there and watched the big cowman go up the sidewalk, looking down, as though he had lost something. Spook shook his head and muttered, "*He's* sorry, eh? That's a new one for Mule Higgins to spring on an unsuspectin' person like me."

IV

BEFORE dark that night, Spook and Lonesome went out to the ranch. Lonesome had covered all the windows with heavy paper, and they ate by lamplight, where no silhouette would fall on the paper-covered windows. The doors were barred, too. Spook had told Lonesome about seeing Scotty Nelson at the Cassell ranch, but Lonesome had no ideas as to why the boss of the Higgins interests would be over there.

"It must still be almost a hundred miles, even if yuh go out the south pass, and there ain't no roads out thataway," Lonesome said.

"Well, I dunno what he was doin' there, Lonesome—but they all knew him."

"Did, huh? And he knows you was there, too."

"I was Jim Smith," grinned Spook.

"And still with some of the marks that Scotty put on yore face. You didn't fool anybody, Spook. How did the other boys act, when Scotty showed up over there?"

"Well, jist natural, I reckon. They all knowed him. I knocked the lamp over and got away in the dark, like I told yuh. 'Course I don't know what was said after I left."

"I dunno," yawned Lonesome. "I wish I had me a crystal ball. I'd like to know the end of this story."

"I've just got a hunch that we'll see the end of it mighty quick—and we don't need any glass balls to tell us."

Spook had no idea how long he had been asleep, but he knew he had been dreaming of hauling a steer out of a washout, and that steer looked like Mule Higgins. He sat up in bed. Lonesome, clad only in sagging underclothes, was standing beside his bunk, lighting a candle. Spook said, "Couldn't yuh see to sleep."

"Sh-h-h-h!" warned Lonesome, and began pulling on his clothes.

"What are yuh shushin' about, Lonesome?"

"There's somebody o u t s i d e this house," whispered Lonesome. "Git into yore pants. I heard 'em, I tell yuh."

Swiftly they dressed. Spook said, "I've allus been taught to humor 'em."

"Yuh mean—humor yore enemies?"

"No, I don't; I mean my locoed friends. All right—what did yuh hear?"

"Noises. I heard horses, footsteps, somethin' brushing against the house. Go ahead and laugh—you half-wit!"

Spook was chuckling, but stopped suddenly and sniffed audibly. Wood smoke! He jerked off that bunk, his features twisted, as he tried to beat back the thought that someone had fired the ranchhouse.

People didn't do things like that—or did they? Lonesome left the candle in the bottleneck, and they went into the main room. The wood-smoke smell was heavy now, and a pencil of flame licked

up outside a paper-covered window. Lonesome said, "The house is on fire, Spook! Git the water-bucket, while I—" Lonesome ran to the front door, but Spook yelled sharply:

"No! No! Not that door! They're waitin' for us to come out!"

"Spook, this whole blamed house will be on fire in a minute! We've got to get out!"

"And run into what High Pockets got, eh? Use yore brains."

"Yuh mean—before they get fried?"

"They work better thataway. C'mon. Whoa, Blaze!"

A corner of the little kitchen was on fire, and this included the kitchen door. The smoke was heavy, and the heat was beginning to make the place unbearable.

"Spook, they've trapped us!" Lonesome yelled. "We've got to go through a window, or fry to a frazzle."

Lonesome's voice choked off in the smoke. Spook was on his hands and knees, lifting an old iron ring, countersunk into the floor. He yanked up a small trapdoor, just big enough for one person to go through. Lonesome, on his hands and knees, whispered:

"I forgot that old root-house, Spook. If that outside door ain't nailed—"

It wasn't. The door consisted of two, one by twelve boards, nailed together, and hinged with rawhide. It had been a long time since anybody had used the old root-cellar, and it was hanging full of dirty cobwebs.

Spook gently eased the sloping door open. Smoke whirled around them, as they crawled outside, but the flames were not lighting that side of the house yet. Like a couple of overgrown lizards, they started for the fringe of brush beyond the fence. A man yelled a warning, and in a split-second Lonesome's eyes were filled with gravel, when a bullet smashed into the ground a foot from his head.

Spook saw the shooter, crouched beside the woodpile. He was well illuminated by the fire, but a swirl of smoke stopped him from firing his second shot. Spook twisted around and shot back at the man, who yelped sharply, and seemed to be doing a Spring Dance on the chip-strewn ground.

But Spook didn't wait to see the conclusion of the dance. Lonesome was swearing that he was as blind as a bat, but he followed Spook. A few feet from the fence, several bullets went over them, smacking into the brush, but the two men went under the lower strand of the wire, and into the brush.

FINALLY they couldn't even see the man at the woodpile. The ranch-house was a blazing pyre, with no hope of saving anything. They heard a man cursing bitterly, and it seemed that they were riding away, but away from the flames it was too dark to see.

"I'm beginnin' to see a little again, Spook," Lonesome said. "I was scared I'd lost both eyes. That hooligan shore stuck that bullet awful close to me. Didja hit him, Spook?"

"If I didn't, that was a funny place to start dancin'."

"Prob'ly hit him on the funny-bone. Well, there goes our home."

"Yeah," admitted Spook wearily. "Well, we won't have to hire anybody to look after the place, Lonesome. Cattle gone, house gone."

"And," added Lonesome dryly, "I don't feel so awful good myself, if anybody rides up and asks yuh."

"Oh, I reckon you'll be among us."

"Yeah, I'll be stickin'. Ol' Gravel Face Lucas, I reckon."

They slept in the stable that night, with only a horse blanket for a covering, and in the cold, gray dawn they looked over what had been their happy home, now only a pile of ashes. The only thing left standing was the stone fireplace and the cook-stove.

"It wasn't much," said Lonesome, "but it was more'n we've got now."

Spook went over to the woodpile, which was far enough away to escape the flames, and found what seemed to be blood spots on some of the chips. He picked up a shining object and looked it over carefully. It was a concha off somebody's chaps. Silverplated over copper, and most of the plating had worn away. The stamped design was a conventional rose.

Spook showed the concha to Lonesome, who looked it over and shook his head. "I don't know who wears conchas like that," he said. "Yuh never pay any attention to cowboy jewelry, Spook."

Lonesome picked up a chip and examined it critically, even smelling of it.

"Yuh can't smell blood," said Spook. "At least, yuh couldn't smell a stain of it on wood."

"I can smell this," declared Lonesome.

"What does it smell like?"

"Skunk," declared Lonesome.

THEY rode to Palo Seco for breakfast, and found Tom Heffner, the prosecutor, there. Spook told the lawyer about the burning of his ranchhouse, and the murderous attack on him and Lonesome.

"Riley," said the lawyer, "what is the meaning of all this? Oh, I know about your feud with Higgins, but Higgins is not a murderer."

"You mean," corrected Lonesome, "he ain't been caught at it."

"No, I don't mean that either. Higgins is a big man, and he wouldn't stoop to such things. I'm willing to help you boys in every way I can, but—well, I can't see Mr. Higgins mixed up in that sort of a deal. When you change your ideas, come and see me."

"I can see yore angle," said Spook soberly, "but remember, Higgins didn't put me in office."

The lawyer's temper flared momentarily, but he kept his mouth shut. Spook said, "Yuh can't blame me for bein' sore, Tom. I've lost my cattle, lost my home and yuh can't expect me to keep my temper."

"I suppose not," replied the lawyer grudgingly. "I heard that Gus Elko got accidentally shot at the Box X last night. Fooling with a six-shooter in the bunkhouse, I heard. Doc Adams is out there now, I believe."

"You don't seem too shore of anythin'," said Lonesome. "Bein' a lawyer, yuh have to be thataway, I reckon."

After the lawyer left the restaurant Spook said, "It's kinda funny, Lonesome—Elko gettin' shot accidentally last night."

"It works out," said Lonesome. "If that bunch of firebugs came straight from the Box X, Higgins' home ranch, I'm jist afraid that Mr. Heffner called the turn all wrong, Spook."

"I jist wonder if Gus Elko was the drygulcher at the woodpile last night," mused Spook. "Gus has allus seemed a good sort of a feller, too. But," Spook sighed deeply, "yuh never can tell. They're out to salivate us, feller. Lady Luck has been on our side, but yuh never can tell. Mebbe next time the Old Lady will be lookin' the other way."

Restlessness drove Spook out of the office. He left Lonesome there and went away alone, riding his blaze-faced bay gelding. Spook wanted to be alone to think things over. He was fed-up with being the sheriff, but too stubborn now to resign. He realized that it was an unequal battle, with all the Higgins interests against him, but there was no sign of a yellow streak in Spook Riley's makeup.

He swung off on the road to the HEH, riding slowly. He had no ideas in mind. He fully realized that the same men who sneaked in at night and burned his ranchhouse, in order to either burn him alive or kill him when he came out, would not hesitate to shoot him on sight.

He came in fairly close to the HEH ranch buildings, but swung in over a brushy point, where he could see the buildings, but not be seen. There was no one around the place, no horses in the corral. He knew Shorty Buck, the old cook—had known him a long time. Maybe he'd run in and have a few words with Shorty.

He rode down to the old, rambling ranchhouse and dismounted in front of the place. The front door was closed. He stepped up, on the porch, and as he approached the door, it opened and Shorty Buck stood there, staring at him.

"Hyah, Shorty," he said and grinned. Shorty didn't grin. He tried to, but failed. His sleeves were rolled up, and around his ample waist was a dirty, flour-sack apron.

He said, rather huskily, Spook thought, "Huh-howdy, Spook. I was just—goin' down to the stable. Wait for me, will yuh?"

"Shore," Spook said and sat down on the railing, rolling a cigarette, as he waited.

But Shorty didn't come back. He slipped a horse out a side door of the stable, and a few moments later Spook saw him hightailing it down the bottom of a dry-wash, getting away from the ranch very fast. It was all very puzzling to Spook. He threw away his partly-smoked quirly, opened the door and looked into the house.

He couldn't see anybody in there, but he did get a strong whiff of liniment. The door to an adjoining room was open, and Spook moved cautiously over there. The liniment smell came from a blanketed figure in the bed. Spook pulled

the blanket back and looked at the unconscious man. Then he pulled up the window-shade and took another look. He was the one they called Tony, over at the Cassell ranch.

Spook yanked the blanket back and discovered that the man's left leg was heavily bandaged on the thigh. He was unconscious, unmoving. Spook pulled the blanket back and went into the main room.

A dirty, Navajo rug was on the floor near a table, where someone had apparently kicked it aside. Without any reason for the act, Spook took his toe and straightened the rug. Under it was a large envelope, plain, unsealed, but containing something.

Simply out of curiosity, Spook drew out the contents—a single, legal paper, and discovered it was a bill-of-sale, all made out and signed by H. E. Higgins. It was for one hundred head of cattle, branded HEH. It was witnessed by Scotty Nelson. Spook recognized Higgins' signature, which looked like almost anything than the signature of H. E. Higgins. The bill-of-sale was made out to the Cassell Cattle Company.

Spook started to replace it in the envelope, but gave it another look. It was dated the twelfth of August. Today was the eleventh. Another thing—after Scotty Nelson's signature, as witness, was the one word—Sheriff!

Spook closed the envelope, started to put it on the table, then hesitated. It proved that Higgins had lied about not knowing Tex Cassell, and it proved that Scotty Nelson was using a title he was not entitled to use. Spook put the envelope in his pocket and walked outside.

There was no one in sight as he mounted his horse and rode back to Palo Seco, where he rode up to Doctor Adams' home. The doctor was there, puttering in his yard.

"How did yuh find Gus Elko, Doc?" Spook inquired.

"Oh, he'll be all right, Spook. It was just a flesh wound. What's new?"

Spook shifted in his saddle and reached for his cigarette papers, before he replied, "Yuh didn't get a call to go to the HEH, did yuh?"

Doctor Adams shook his head. "No I didn't, Spook. Has somebody got hurt out there?"

"They might," replied Spook, as he turned and rode back to the office. Doctor Adams looked after Spook, shook his head and said to no one in particular, "After what's happened to him, I don't wonder he is talking queerly."

V

WHEN Mary Higgins came to town while Spook was away, she got the ranch mail and did a little shopping. Then she went back to the ranch. While in town she heard a lot of things about her father—not facts, but gossip, and she didn't like it a little bit. She found her father in the main room at the Box X, then proceeded to tell him what Palo Seco was talking about.

Mule Higgins listened patiently. He had heard it before. She said, "Why, they are even making bets as to how long Spook Riley will last as sheriff, and just how long he will live."

"Life is a gamble, my dear," he told her. "Now, don't you—"

"They say you burned his ranchhouse, Dad—or ordered it burned."

Mule Higgins got to his feet and walked around the big room, while Mary sat on a chair and watched him. He looked worried, nervous. "If you didn't do it—you better see that nothing happens to him, Dad," Mary said.

He whirled on her, opened his mouth, then closed it slowly.

"I can't argue with you," he said huskily. "Believe me, I am not guilty. I said I'd run him out of office. I said I'd run him out of this valley. Maybe I talked too much—I don't know."

"It isn't nice for a girl to hear folks hinting that her father is a killer, a burner of ranchhouses and a rustler."

"What do you think that father—oh, what's wrong with everybody?"

Mule Higgins shoved a chair roughly aside and walked over to a big window, where he could look down toward the stable and corrals. Scotty Nelson was down there, gentling a colt in the near corral.

Higgins looked in that direction while Shorty Buck, the HEH cook, galloped into the yard and drew up sharply beside the corral. He was dressed just as he was when he left the HEH ranch, and he waved his arms excitedly, as he talked to Scotty Nelson.

Nelson seemed mad about something, glancing alternately at the ranchhouse and back at the excited cook, who finally

whirled his horse around and went away. Scotty Nelson stood there several moments, one hand braced against the fence, but went to the stable and flung the door open.

Mary was talking to her father, but he was paying no attention. He saw Scotty Nelson ride away, before he turned away from the window. Mary said, "Dad, why don't you answer?"

But Mule Higgins didn't answer, nor even look at her. He picked up his hat and strode out of the house. Mary walked to the window and watched him lead a saddled horse from the stable and ride away.

JUST about this time Spook Riley went to his office, where he found Lonesome, anxious for news. Spook told him what he had found at the HEH, and the sudden getaway of Shorty Buck, the cook. Lonesome cuffed his old hat viciously and swore a little.

"Doc Adams said that Gus Elko only had a flesh wound," added Spook.

"But what was that feller named Tony doin' over here from the Cassell spread?" Lonesome said. "He don't even know us, Spook. And why did Shorty hightail it out of there? It sounds funny."

"It may be funny, but I ain't come to the laughin' point yet," said Spook dryly, and showed Lonesome the bill-of-sale.

Lonesome read it, a quiet whistle on his lips. Spook said:

"Higgins is sellin' Cassell a hundred head of cows tomorrer, and he don't even know Cassell. And if yuh notice, Scotty has signed hisself as sheriff. Mebbe he thought I'd be dead, and he could step back into the job again. I dunno!"

Lonesome nodded grimly. "And they ain't never sent for a doctor to patch up this Tony person, eh?"

"Doc Adams says he ain't been called. And I'm tellin' yuh, Lonesome, that feller needs a doctor."

"Well, why don't we send Doc out there, Spook?"

"That's Higgins' deal, Lonesome. If he wants Doc Adams, it's up to him to make the call. Anyway, I don't want to run Doc's neck into trouble. We'll watch things, pardner. If any of Higgins' outfit come to Palo Seco, we'll find out why."

But none of the Higgins men came to town that afternoon. At supper time Spook checked with Doc Adams, and found that no one had called him. The doctor tried to get Spook to tell him just why he might expect a call from Higgins, but Spook merely said he thought they might call him.

Doctor Adams met Judge Cole on the street and told him of Spook's inquiries. "He is acting very queer," declared the doctor. Judge Cole smiled. "I wouldn't worry about him, Doc. I've known the boy a long time. I'll admit that he has been traveling a rough road, but he's perfectly normal. He probably has a very good reason for asking you questions."

"I hope so, Judge," sighed the doctor.

Spook and Lonesome secured a room at the hotel that night, not caring to sleep under a horse blanket in the stable, and take chances on another assault in the dark.

They were out early, keeping an eye on the main street. It was shortly after ten o'clock, when Scotty Nelson rode down the street, tied his horse in front of the general store, and went slowly up to the bank.

Judge Cole was in the bank, talking with Amos Keller, the cashier, when Scotty came in. He spoke to both men and went up to the cashier's window, where he handed Amos Keller a letter and a check.

The elderly cashier read the note, picked up the check and looked at it closely. It was for twenty-five thousand dollars, drawn to Cash, and signed by H. E. Higgins. The note read:

Dear Amos:

I am unable to get to the bank, so am sending check for twenty-five thousand by Scotty Nelson. I need the cash to complete a deal today. Thank you. Can you give this to me in bills not over fifty dollars each.

It was a big order on a bank as small as the Palo Seco Cattlemen's Bank, and Keller hesitated. "That is a lot of money, Scotty," Keller said.

"What difference does that make?" queried Nelson. "He's got more than that on deposit. There's his note and there's the check. You ought to know his signature."

"Yes, yes, of course. But—well, of course, I know his signature, but under the circumstances—"

Amos Keller had to open the vault to get that much currency. He brought it back to the window and began counting it. "How is everything going, Scotty?" Judge Cole asked.

"Fine, Judge—everything is fine."

"I'll wrap it in paper and put it in a sack," offered the banker."

"Any old way, just so I can carry it," said Scotty impatiently. The cashier was very slow and deliberate. It was the biggest check he had cashed in years, and he didn't want any mistakes.

The package was finally made up and handed to Scotty. As he turned from the window toward the door, Spook Riley was between him and the doorway. For a moment their eyes met, as they passed. Scotty was almost to the doorway, when Spook said:

"Nelson! I want to ask you somethin'."

Scotty Nelson jerked up short, whirled, the package dropping from his right hand, as he went for his gun. Whether or not Spook Riley expected something like this, his draw was just a bit faster than Scotty's, and the shots blasted almost at the same instant.

Spook jerked aside, as a bullet burned over the top of his left ear. He saw Scotty's gun spinning out of his hand, and the next moment Scotty was running down the sidewalk to his horse, where he made a flying mount and raced out of town.

IT was all over in seconds. Amos Keller was crouched down behind his window, Judge Cole was standing there, jaw sagging. Spook didn't move, just stood there, staring at Scotty's six-shooter on the floor of the bank. Slowly he turned his head and looked at the wall behind him, where an ornately-framed oil painting of the first president of the bank hung in all its splendor. A forty-five bullet had struck the face in the painting almost squarely between the eyes.

"My God!" breathed the old judge. "That—that was fast!"

"Wasn't it?" remarked Spook in amazement. "He dropped his package, too."

"The money," whispered the cashier. "Twenty-five thousand dollars. Give it to me, please!"

Spook gave the package to the banker, and picked up the forty-five. There was blood on it, too. Spook grinned.

"Is it funny?" asked the judge.

"It is," replied Spook soberly, "because I don't know why he went after his gun. Mr. Keller, how come he drew all that money?"

"I—well, I—" the banker hesitated.

"Go ahead and tell him, Amos," the judge prompted.

Reassured by the judge, the banker showed Spook the check and the note. Spook didn't know what it was all about, but he did know that it was a lot of money.

There were drops of blood along the wooden sidewalk, where Scotty Nelson ran, indicating that Spook's bullet had, at least, wrecked a finger of his gun-hand. Spook took Scotty's gun down to the office. The shooting had attracted a number of people, and among them was Tom Heffner, the prosecutor.

Judge Cole told Heffner what happened in the bank, and that Spook was not the aggressor. But Spook didn't care what anybody thought. He was finally getting irked over the way things were going. Lonesome wasn't quite able to analyze his feelings in the matter.

"I'm either gettin' awful mad, or awful scared," he declared, "and I don't know which. Spook, they can't have bad luck all the time. If they try shootin' us often enough, they'll eventually get in practise. I don't like it."

"Well, I'll tell yuh about me," declared Spook grimly. "I'm through foolin' around with the hired-hands, Lonesome. I'm goin' to have me a pow-wow with the head man of the tribe."

"Yuh mean—go out and tackle Mule Higgins, Spook?"

"That's the idea, and we're saddlin' up right now. We're goin' to beard the lion in his den."

"Wrong animal," said Lonesome. "Yuh're old enough to know a lion from a skunk."

They rode out of town a few minutes later, heading for the Box X ranch-house. Spook told Lonesome, "You let me do the talkin'—yuh're too danged sudden."

"I'll bet Scotty Nelson would appreciate that statement," grinned Lonesome. "I hope yuh shot his trigger-finger off. He might even become human."

"I don't mind statin'," said Spook soberly, "that I was not shootin' at his gun-hand. The bullet splattered agin the

butt of that gun, which prob'ly shocked him plumb to the shoulder. Anyway, he didn't stop to discuss things."

About a mile from the Box X they met Mary Higgins, riding alone in a single buggy. She drew up as they came along, looking curiously at them.

"Mary, is yore father at home?" Spook asked.

Mary shook her head, "No, he isn't, Spook. He left the ranch yesterday afternoon, and hasn't returned. Is there more trouble, Spook?"

"Queer trouble, Mary. This mornin' Scotty Nelson came to town, with a letter from yore father to the bank, askin' 'em to send him twenty-five thousand dollars in cash. Scotty had the check, signed by yore father. I didn't know about this. I walked into the bank, just before Scotty got all the money.

"As Scotty walked past me, I called to him and said I wanted to ask him a question. Well," Spook shook his head, "I don't know what happened to him. I mean, I don't know why he done it, but he dropped the money and went for his gun."

"You mean—what happened, Spook?"

"Well, his bullet grazed my ear, and hit that oil paintin' on the wall square between the eyes. My bullet knocked the gun out of his hand, and he got on his horse and got away."

"Spook!" gasped Mary. "Why, I—it makes me weak to think about it."

"Made me kinda weak, too," grinned Spook. "I jist kinda took root there, and let him get away."

"He didn't come to the Box X," said Mary. "Spook, I can't understand why Dad would have Scotty—why would Dad want twenty-five thousand in cash?"

"The note said he wanted to complete a deal today."

"A deal? Dad never told me of any deal."

"Would he?" queried Spook.

"He might. You see, I am not a bookkeeper, but I do keep his ranch accounts—after a fashion. I like to do it. But before Dad makes a deal, he most always talks it over with me. Why, twenty-five thousand is a lot of money!"

"They say it is," grinned Lonesome. "But he didn't get it!"

"Yuh see," explained Spook, "I wanted to see yore father about it. In fact, we've got several things to talk about, Mary. They're kinda personal things that you'd never enter in yore books."

Mary looked at him closely. "I think I know what you mean, Spook," she said quietly. "But he isn't home, unless he came since I left. I hope he has because it worries me."

"Scotty lives at the Box X, don't he?" asked Spook.

"Yes, he does. But he wasn't there all night, and I know he didn't come back to the Box X this morning."

"Yore dad hasn't been in town," said Lonesome. "In fact, since yesterday mornin', Scotty has been the only Higgins man in town, as far as we know."

Mary smiled wryly. "You are keeping cases on the Higgins outfit, it seems," she said. "Well, I must get along and do some shopping for the cook—or we can't eat."

"See yuh later, Mary," called Spook.

"I hope so, Spook—take care of yourself—please."

VI

QUIETLY they sat on their horses and watched her drive away. Lonesome said suddenly, "Spook, take care of yourself—please. What about me, huh? Go run yore big nose into a bullet, and see who cares! Fine thing! Huh!"

"She meant both of us," said Spook, and couldn't conceal his grin.

"Yea-a-ah? Yoreself means both of us? Twins, huh? Get that grin off yore homely mug! Fine thing! Us a-settin' on a bundle of dynamite, watchin' the fuse burn up—and you grin wide enough to twist yore big ears. Well, what do we attempt to do next, Cupid's Delight?"

Spook sobered quickly. "I forgot, Lonesome. There's just one place to go for the answer and that's the HEH."

Spook began rolling a cigarette, making no move to ride on. He finished and lighted the cigarette, his brow furrowed. Unconsciously he drew out the Forty-Four brand in the dust on the leg of his chaps with the match, as he sat there. It was a very simple, connected pair of fours. Suddenly he drew three more lines in the dust on the old leather.

Lonesome was watching him curiously. Spook seemed to be merely doodling, squinting away from the smoke of his quirly. Then he looked up, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. He was looking past Lonesome, who looked around quickly,

but there was nothing but a brushy hillside, on which nothing moved. He looked back at Spook. "What did yuh see?" he asked quietly.

"Nothin', Lonesome—I was just thinkin' how blamed blind men can get. C'mon, pardner."

Spook led the way straight across the hills, heading in the general direction of the HEH, and losing no time. Lonesome said, "How long before I get smart, too?"

"Use yore brains, like I did," replied Spook soberly.

"And wear out m' natural resources? You tell me what this is all about, Spook."

"Soon as we get time to talk. We're ridin' fast, pardner."

They swung around for a chance to look the ranchhouse over, but there was no sign of life at the house or stable.

"It shore looks like we've drawed a blank," said Lonesome.

"It don't look like a celebration," replied Spook. "We'll be pretty careful just the same. Yuh never can tell."

They left their horses out behind the house and went on in against the wall, circling to the front. There was not a sound, not even the bawling of a calf. They reached the old veranda-like porch, where they studied things closely. Satisfied that everything was peaceful, they walked up, knocked on the door, and waited for an answer.

It came, all right, but in an unexpected way, when a bullet smashed into the door, missing Spook by a mere inch. A rifle blared from down by the stable. A low shot drilled the bullet between Lonesome's knees, and splintered a panel of the door. The two shots were only a fraction of a second apart.

A fraction of a second later Spook and Lonesome were inside the ranchhouse, sprawled on the floor, the door kicked shut behind them. Guns in hand, they listened closely. Quietly Lonesome said, "Yuh can laugh at bowlegs all yuh want to, but if mine had been straight—"

"Forget yore anatomy," advised Spook, sliding to his knees. "Get over to that window and watch the stable."

Lonesome obeyed quickly, hunched on his haunches, only his eyes over the sill. Spook got to his feet. The place still smelled of liniment. Slowly he walked over to a door and kicked it open. Nothing happened.

This was the room where Spook had found Tony, from the Cassell ranch. There was a man on the bed, but it wasn't Tony—it was Mule Higgins, all tied up, blood all over his face. In fact, Mule Higgins was sort of a mess, Spook decided. Lonesome yelled:

"He-e-ey, Spook! There's two fellers goin' down the drywash, like the devil had tied tin cans on their tails! They must have got out the back of the stable."

"C'mere!" called Spook.

Lonesome came in, stopped short, staring at Higgins. Then he said, "What are yuh figgerin', Spook, whether to turn him loose, or hit him again?"

"I can't quite savvy this deal."

"Use yore brains—that's what yuh advised me. Did yuh hear me tell yuh that them two drygulchers pulled out on us?"

"Yeah, I heard yuh. We don't—listen!"

A WHEELED vehicle was driving up to the house. Spook went quickly into the main room and glanced through a window. "It's Mary!" he exclaimed and threw open the door.

Mary was climbing out of the buggy, but stopped short, staring at Spook.

"Come on in, Mary," he called to her.

She seemed to hesitate for a moment, but came on, watching him. At the doorway she said, "What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" he countered.

"I am looking for my father."

Spook drew a deep breath and stepped aside. "You've found him, but he ain't in very good shape," he told her.

Spook came in behind Mary, who stopped, staring in amazement at her father. Neither man made any comment. After a few moments she said, "Spook, why did you hurt him?"

"We just found him like that," said Spook. "Look at the bullet-holes in the front door. They tried to bush us."

"Who did?" she asked anxiously.

"*Quien sabe?*" replied Spook.

"Some of the Higgins outfit," said Lonesome flatly.

Mule Higgins was mumbling, and Mary leaned over the bed.

"He is asking for Scotty Nelson," she said wearily. "Oh, he's badly hurt, Spook. Can't we take off the ropes?"

Deftly and swiftly Lonesome unroped Mule Higgins. Mary got some water from the kitchen and tried clumsily to mop away the blood. Mule Higgins moved and tried to sit up. He was beginning to regain consciousness.

"Mary, you'll have to take care of him," Spook said. "We've got to keep goin'. I hate to leave yuh, but this deal has got to finish today."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"If anybody asks yuh, we'll be at the Box X—I hope. Mary, you don't understand, and I can't tell yuh now. You've got to believe that me and Lonesome are doin' our best."

She looked straight at him and said, "I believe you, Spook."

As they swung back into their saddles Lonesome drawled: "That ort to hold yuh for awhile, feller. You've done found somebody that believes yuh."

"I'm glad she said that, Lonesome. It's like a spur to a tired horse."

"Not with yore ears, pardner. Let's hit the grit."

Spook had no idea what they might find at the Box X. The two bushwhackers had started in that direction, and the fact that, except for those two, the HEH was deserted, the Box X was the logical spot to find somebody. Spook admitted to himself that he was shooting at the moon, but hoping to make a bull's-eye.

At least, the Box X wasn't deserted. There were three saddled horses tied at the front of the ranchhouse, as Spook and Lonesome came in from the rear, slid off their horses behind an old blacksmith shop, and tried to figure out just what move to make. Lonesome said, "Look! Over there by the kitchen door, Spook!" Lonesome called. "It's a man, on the ground. Can yuh see him?"

"Yeah, I can see him. Somethin' knocked him flat. Oh-oh! Lonesome, that looks like Old Louie, the Chinese cook. He's got an apron on. Now, why did they hurt the old feller?"

"Hurt? He looks awful dead t' me, Spook. He shore ain't out there, takin' a sun bath. Mebbe we can get closer."

They eased around to the other corner, which gave them a straight run to a blank corner of the ranchhouse. No one challenged them. They eased along the side of the house, crawled low under one window and came in near the corner of the front porch.

A man was standing in the doorway, his back to them, and as they watched him, he backed out, followed by another man, who was also turned, looking back into the house. The first man was Tex Cassell, and the other was Scotty Nelson. Neither of them looked toward the corner, being intent on what was going on inside the main room.

Suddenly they both turned and leaped off the porch, as Sam Slade came running out to join them. They all instinctively crouched, and a moment later the old ranchhouse shook from a mild explosion. "I'll bet that jarred the door loose!" Scotty Nelson said.

"If it didn't," laughed Sam Slade, "we'll shoot it again."

The three men started for the house again, and Spook saw that Scotty's right hand was heavily bandaged. Slade and Cassell were almost in the house, with Scotty a step behind them, when Scotty turned his head and saw Spook and Lonesome.

Scotty's warning yell brought both men up sharply, and Scotty leaped the corner railing. Cassell whirled and shot from his hip, but the bullet hit the railing of the porch, spinning splinters into the air.

By this time Spook and Lonesome were ready for any emergency, and Spook's shot blended with the crack of Cassell's gun. Lonesome shot twice, his left shoulder braced against the corner of the house. Slade was off balance, with one foot inside the house, and his shot barely tilted Lonesome's sombrero.

TEX CASSELL was game. Spook's bullet shocked him back against the corner railing, where he was braced, trying to lift his gun, when the spinning Slade crashed into him, blocking his attempt to shoot again. Then they both went down, with Slade on top.

Spook was onto that porch in a flash, racing across to them, kicking their guns aside. Scotty Nelson had reached the corral, trying to catch one of the three horses, which had torn loose, when the explosion came. Spook yelled at him to stop, but Nelson had no idea of surrender. His grab for the horse was futile, and he staggered into the fence, a gun in his left hand.

Whether he was ambidextrous or not, his first bullet cut between Spook's left arm and his ribs. Where the second one

went, no one would ever know. Both Spook and Lonesome fired at the same moment. Scotty dropped his gun, whirled around, tried to grab the fence to stay upright, but slid to the ground.

"Three babies down — three seegars!" Lonesome yelled.

Spook leaned against the railing, looked at Slade and Cassell, sprawled on the narrow porch, neither of them moving. Spook said huskily, "Lonesome, do you realize we've shot-up three men, all in a few seconds."

"Well, yeah," replied Lonesome, "we have. It's been a nice day for it—but, blast it, I feel kinda sick."

"Me, too. Scotty Nelson, Tex Cassell, Sam Slade—all out."

"Why?" asked Lonesome. "If yore brain is still active, and you can still talk, tell me what it's all about?"

SPOOK took out his tobacco and papers, but his figers didn't work too well, and he spilled his tobacco. Lonesome said, "I'm glad to see that yuh're human, too, Spook. Inside me, I'm like a aig-beater. Oh-oh, what's this?"

It was Mary and her horse and buggy as well as Mule Higgins. They were coming straight up to the porch. Higgins looked as though he had stuck his head in a threshing-machine, but he was all right again. His shirt was smeared with dried gore, and still wet from the water Mary had used on him. Spook said huskily, "Huh-howdy, folks."

Mule Higgins pointed a shaking finger at the two figures on the floor of the porch, and asked, "Who are they?"

"The one on top is Sam Slade, and the other one is Tex Cassell. They wanted to play rough."

"Good!" exclaimed Higgins. "Who's that down by the corral, Spook?"

"Sorry," replied Spook, "but that's Scotty. He wanted to get into the game, too, even if one hand was bad."

"Thank yuh, Spook."

"They got Louie, I reckon," Lonesome said. "He's out by the kitchen door."

"Louie!" blurted Higgins. "Them rattlers!" Higgins got out of the buggy unassisted, but he was suffering from a very sore head. It was difficult for him to get up the steps.

Spook said: "They set off a blast in the house, just as we got here."

Mule Higgins swore. "I knew it," he said. "They tried to force me to give them the combination of my own personal safe. So they dynamited it, eh?"

"Never got in to git anythin'," said Lonesome.

"Good! I had about ten thousand dollars in there. Scotty fell down on the job, when he forged my name to a letter and a check, and didn't get the money. I hear that you stopped him, Spook."

"Unconsciously," grinned Spook.

"You stopped him, and I don't care how it was done. They were pullin' out for Mexico, the dirty murderers. They've been turning my HEH cows over to Cassell, givin' him a forged bill-of-sale each time to show the sheriff in his county. And my best friend, Scotty Nelson, was the witness."

"Not only that," said Spook, "but they stole every blasted one of our Forty-Four cows, altered the brand to HEH, and sold them to Cassell. It's a cinch to alter the Forty-Four to the HEH, and Slade knew it, when he drew up the new brand for you, Higgins."

"I'll make that up to you, Spook. You'll get paid for every head they stole." Mule Higgins leaned against the railing of the porch and looked at Spook. "You're all right," he said. "I gave yuh a bad deal, Spook—me and my honest gang. I thought I was a big man, a judge of men. I'm through tryin' to be big. A man finds that he is pretty small, when his own gang turn on him. They tortured me, tryin' to rob me some more. They wasn't satisfied to take my cows, they wanted my cash. And you stopped 'em both times, Spook. I reckon I'm gettin' old, and I'm feelin' pretty rocky, but I wouldn't mind, if you'd give me a swift kick."

Spook grinned slowly. "Yesterday, I wished for the chance, but today, I'm too blamed tired. Let's pass it, Higgins."

Mule Higgins didn't say anything. He looked at Mary and back at Spook Riley. They were looking at each other. Higgins turned to Lonesome.

"Lonesome," he said wearily, "how about me and you takin' a look at my safe? I'd like to see how badly they busted it."

Lonesome looked curiously at Mule Higgins, wondering that Higgins would suggest such a thing, with so many other things to be done. Then he looked at Mary and Spook, nodded his head and started for the doorway. "I reckon it's the thing t'do—now," he said.

the Wall

To win the heart of a beautiful Mormon girl, Lee Galt braves the unknown dangers of a wagon train making its way toward a rendezvous with destiny!

# of Silence

a novelet by
GEORGE MICHENER

I

THE CLOCK sat on the oak table, centered in the yellow pool of lamplight. Beneath the dial of the clock was painted a fabulously impossible bird. The clock was sixteen years old. Sixteen years is not long—not in the life of a good clock. Time is the element in which a clock moves. A good clock moves through Time with the serenity of a fish in water.

"One of the teeth on the escape wheel was bent," he said. "It needed cleaning—that's all the trouble was. It's a good clock."

With quill and ink, on the paper in the back of the clock, he wrote neatly: *"Cleaned and repaired by Lee Galt, Feb. 3rd, 1846."*

He carried the clock to its shelf. His fingers worked delicately with the crutch-wire, straightening it and bending it again until the beat of the verge sounded steady and sweet. He nodded. A faint smile showed on his thin, dark face. It was a good clock. Pride of craftsmanship had gone into the making of it. Pride of craftsmanship had gone into the repairing of it.

He came back to the table. He stowed away in his small leather bag the tools of his trade—file, screwdrivers and pliers, dogwood pegs, the

Galt and his girl ran as the shots rang out

tiny bottle of oil from the jaw of the porpoise.

Elder Proudy, squat, black-whiskered, massive-headed, went to the door and opened it. He listened to the noises of the night.

Elder Colton leaned tensely across the table, staring at Elder Proudy's back. He, too, seemed to be listening.

Fear was abroad in the land. Now it had entered this little Illinois farmhouse. Lee Galt could feel it. Fear had slid stealthily in with the icy air that rolled along the floor like a rising tide.

For nearly two years the blood of a martyr had been a dark stain in the jail at Carthage. Now the mobs were howling here in Illinois as they had howled six years before in Missouri. This was the "year of the burnings". Farmhouses were going up in flames and fat farm lands were going for a song. The Saints were fleeing to Nauvoo, the "Beautiful Place". They were gathering their strength so that their Moses might lead them from out of the Wilderness.

Lee Galt's eyes sought the shadows beyond the table where Mary Proudy stood, stiffly motionless. He imagined he could hear her soft breathing. She was Elder Proudy's daughter. She was seventeen, maybe eighteen, years old. Lee Galt was twenty-two.

Elder Proudy closed the door. "Cold," he said.

Galt reached slowly for the sheepskin coat he had hung over a chair. His gaze was still upon the girl. He was reluctant to leave.

"If you want," said Elder Proudy, "you're more than welcome to stay the night. You can sleep with Elder Colton."

Elder Colton grinned. He might have been a year older than Galt.

"I snore," he said, "and it's stuffed with corn shucks. But you're welcome."

"Thank you," said Galt. "I'll stay." He sat down.

"You been around these parts before?" asked Elder Colton.

Galt shook his head. "I just wandered in."

And tomorrow, he thought, he would wander out again. Where he was going he didn't know. He was slight and wiry. He had the black hair and eyes of a gypsy and the slender hands of the creative artist. He had an itch in his foot and a dream in his head. Someday he was going to build a better long-case clock than anyone had ever built before him—that was his dream.

But first, before he built this marvelous clock of his, he was looking for something. What it was, he didn't know that, either. Maybe, though, he had finally found it. Maybe he had.

He kept looking at Mary Proudy.

"It's not good here," said Elder Proudy bitterly. "It could be a land of milk and honey, and it's not." He seated himself heavily across the table from Galt. "We're leaving," he said.

Galt nodded. He asked no questions; he didn't need to. He knew why they were leaving. Colton, Proudy and Mary Proudy would be joining the trek from Nauvoo to the Promised Land. And no one—perhaps not even Brigham Young, that energetic organizer, that man of iron purpose—knew where the Promised Land was. They'd go on and on, thousands strong, and Faith would lead them and Intolerance would drive them, the modern Children of Israel.

MARY PROUDY moved closer to the table. Her face was pale, as if she had been indoors too much. Her eyes were large and darkly wondering.

"You go around repairing clocks?" she asked, almost timorously. "You just going anywhere?"

Galt nodded. "Watches and clocks both."

She gestured toward the clock. "It's so—so complicated."

"Not that one," said Galt. "There's no attachments—only a striking train. Did you ever hear of the Strasbourg Clock?"

She hadn't. She leaned forward at the table, her eyes widening as Galt described the great clock at Strasbourg, the numerous dials, the wondrous, turning globe of the heavens, the pantomiming puppets, the crowing cock.

He told of other famous clocks—the ones at Venice, Lubeck, Lyons. His voice, as he spoke of these works of long dead masters, became hushed and reverent.

"And the story is," he said at the end, "that when Lipp finished the clock at Lyons, he had his eyes put out so he would never be able to make another clock like it."

"Wickedness!" interrupted Elder

Proudy. "I'll have no such talk here of a man maiming himself. The body is sacred!" For a moment Elder Proudy regarded Galt sternly. Then he said: "It is our custom to have a small service at this time of the evening. . . . Elder Colton, will you read?"

Elder Colton got out a book. "And it came to pass that Coriantumr wrote again an epistle unto Shiz, desiring that he. . . ." and his voice droned on.

Elder Proudy sat straight and as attentive as a statue.

Mary Proudy's eyes were glistening in the lamplight. Her lips were slightly parted and a faint flush had come into her cheeks. It wasn't religious fervor that had gripped Mary Proudy. Elder Colton's reading was scarcely that inspired. In fact, Elder Colton read very badly. He squinted and scowled and had a tendency to mumble.

". . . And it came to pass," he went on doggedly, "that they fought all that day, and when the night came . . ."

Mary Proudy's gaze met Galt's, and she averted her eyes. The flush ran higher in her cheeks.

Elder Colton struggled on with his reading.

Mary Proudy's eyes remained averted. Galt had the notion that she was watching him from beneath her long lashes. He felt warm inside. He no longer heard Elder Colton, and he had forgotten Elder Proudy. He was conscious only of the girl.

Suddenly Elder Proudy slapped the table. "What's that?"

Elder Colton stopped his reading. Galt heard a distant, bawling voice:

"Proudy! Yee-ow! We're a-comin', Proudy!"

Galt saw Elder Proudy's glance flick to the rifle that hung on pegs above the door. He saw Mary Proudy's face, white as death now. Then Elder Colton blew out the lamp.

Fear had entered the farmhouse again. Galt could feel it crawling in the blackness. He heard Mary Proudy's muffled gasp.

"Clock man, you will have to go." Elder Proudy spoke with a resigned calm. "Elder Colton, I put my Mary in your charge. Hurry now the three of you. Out the back."

The voice from outside came again: "Yee-ow! We're a-comin', you darned old—" The yell ended in a burst of obscenity. There was a chorus of drunken laughter.

Galt's hat and coat were thrust into his arms. He groped in the dark, trying to find his little bag of tools. Before he could find it, Elder Colton's big hand jerked him to his feet. He was hustled across the room, stumbling, overturning a chair. At the doorway he lurched against Mary Proudy.

"Hurry!" cried Elder Colton.

"Yee-ow!" There was the blast of a gun, the tinkle of glass.

Galt seized Mary Proudy's arm. Elder Colton towed them both, pellmell, across the kitchen and threw open the back door.

"Clock man," he ordered, "stay with her! To the creek—run!" He gave Galt a shove.

GALT and the girl ran. Galt glanced back. Elder Colton was no longer with them. He had remained behind with Elder Proudy.

A man came tearing around the side of the house. At once he set up a shout:

"Baggsy! Here's two of 'em! Baggsy!"

Galt pulled the girl along rapidly. From the front of the house they heard another gunshot. Two more in quick succession.

Galt ducked behind a horse shed. He crashed through the brush that lined a creek bed beyond. He followed the creek, slipping on occasional patches of week-old snow. The girl fell and lay prone on the frozen, iron-hard ground. Galt stooped to help her up. He listened, and he could hear no sound of pursuit along the creek.

The cold was intense. It pinched Galt's nostrils. He was reminded of the hat and coat he still carried under his arm. He put on his hat, lifted the girl and placed the coat about her.

Her eyes were closed and she was panting. He could feel the violent pound of her heart.

"Oh, Lord Jehovah!" she whispered with sobbing breath.

Galt stood up and pushed aside the brush. From here, dimly visible in the moonlight, he could see the rear of the farmhouse. He saw three men on foot and a man on horseback. The horseman pointed toward the creek and the men ran that way. The horseman sat motionless and watching—a hunts-

man who had unleashed his hounds.

Galt gripped the girl's arm. "Come on," he said. He hardly could speak; rage constricted his throat and dried his mouth.

He ran on, tugging Mary Proudy after him, keeping to the creek. Bare, cold-stiffened branches whipped his face, cracked his knuckles. The creek made a bend, and Galt saw a house and barn.

A house might mean kindly, civilized folk. A barn might mean a haven, a place of concealment. He headed toward the barn. The girl stumbled and gasped. A large dog rushed at them.

The dog backed Galt and Mary Proudy against the wheel of a hay wagon that stood in the barnyard. The dog danced about them, snarling, daring them to move.

A woman wearing a shawl came around the corner of the barn. She halted a few feet behind the dog. Her face in the moonlight was thin and cold. She looked at the two by the hay wagon, and she looked through them, and she seemed not to see them. They were apostates, pariahs. Whatever they were doing here, they were beneath her notice and unworthy of her curiosity.

She spoke to the dog and turned disdainfully away.

Suddenly, from the creek brush not far distant, came again that dreadful, idiot yell:

"Yee-ow! Yee-ow!"

Mary Proudy's eyes went wide with terror. Her knees were buckling.

"Oh, Lord of Zion!" she moaned. "Run, clock man! Don't wait for me—run!"

Galt swung her from her feet. She was as light as a child. He cradled her in his arms and glared about him.

"Here! Not the barn. They'll look there. Here!"

It was the woman with the dog. Her features, so frigid a moment before, now were furious. She beckoned imperiously and ran to a little smokehouse midway between the barn and the main house.

Galt raced after her. She jerked open the door. Galt set Mary Proudy on her feet, and the three crowded in. The woman pulled the dog in with them and shut the door.

It was black and close in here. Galt was squeezed in between the two women. The dog pressed against his legs and growled.

There was the thud of feet in the barnyard. A yell. The crash of a bottle on the iron tire of the hay wagon.

"The barn!" shouted someone.

"The smokehouse!" shouted someone. "We'll smoke 'em out!"

There was laughter. The thud of feet came closer.

The woman opened the door. She went out with the dog and banged the door behind her. Her voice cut shrilly through the winter night:

"You drunken, filthy pigs! Get out!"

Galt peered out through a tiny ventilation opening. He saw three men, bewhiskered and lumpish. He saw the long shape of a gun and the dull sheen of a butcherknife. The three men were halted and abashed. The woman was facing them:

"We wasn't meanin' any harm, ma'am," one of the men said placatingly. "We was just after—"

"I know what you're after! They went through here a minute ago. That way." The woman pointed. "Three men and a girl."

"Three?" There was a shocked silence.

"And two of them had guns. They may be watching you now."

The men hastily withdrew toward the barn. They held a consultation. Abruptly they turned and went back the way they had arrived.

II

GALT opened the smokehouse door. He and Mary Proudy came out. "Mrs. Gregor, I don't know how to thank you," Mary Proudy said. "We've been neighbors so long, and we've never hardly spoken. We—"

"You can thank me," interrupted the woman coldly, "by getting out of here. There's been nothing but trouble since you people came here. Get out—all of you! Go back to Missouri!"

Galt could feel Mary Proudy stiffen, then shiver.

"Cross the road," said the woman, "and get into the woods. You ought to be safe there. Now, get out!"

Galt and Mary Proudy went on.

"I don't understand it," said Galt.

"She does a fine thing and then blackens it by insult."

"I can understand it," murmured the girl sadly. "It's not how she feels, it's how she thinks she's supposed to feel. Down underneath she's good and kind. You must forget what she said and remember what she did."

Galt took her arm. "You're limping," he said.

"It's all right," she said. "I turned my ankle a little."

They crossed the road, climbed a slope and entered the shadow of the woods. They heard the clatter of a horse. The rider went by on the road below, as straight in the saddle, as arrogant and aloof, as when he had appeared in Elder Proudy's yard. His face was hidden by his broad hatbrim. He was another whom Galt would remember—the rider darkly perceived, the faceless horseman of Intolerance.

"Who is he?" he asked.

"I don't know," said the girl wearily. "There are so many."

"Where'll I take you?" he asked. "You can't go back home."

The girl stood motionless and silent. She stared at the hillock behind which was her father's house. The top of the hillock was black and sharply outlined. Beyond it, the sky was beginning to glow.

"My father," she said. "Elder Colton—"

It was a question only half asked. She expected no answer, and Galt could give her none. They watched the brightening glow.

"It was like this in Missouri," she said. Her voice was emotionally flat, detached, as if she were recounting a dream. "I was eleven then," she said. "I saw our house burned. I saw one of my uncles killed. My mother died a month ago. I'm glad she didn't see this."

The glow in the sky was turning fierce and red. It was fire in the night, as warm and mystic as light through a decanter of wine—as splendid as a man's home going up in flame—as lovely as that dark stain the mobbers left in the jail at Carthage.

Galt swung her around so she could look no more.

"Where'll I take you?" he asked again.

"I don't know," she said. She peered blankly into the depths of the woods. "There's another road over there. It goes to Nauvoo."

They climbed on up the slope, following a faint trail among the trees. Suddenly the girl slipped and went down. She sat on the ground, hugging her knees.

"Just . . . a minute!" she gasped.

Galt leaned over her in an agony of apprehension. The cold pressed flatly to his shirt and chilled the dampness under his arms.

She looked up apologetically. "It's my ankle again. It'll be all right in a little while."

"I'll carry you," said Galt.

He knelt beside her. She put her arm about him.

"You're cold," she said. "I have your coat."

"No," answered Galt huskily, "I'm warm."

Her arm tightened. Her face was hidden against his chest. He held her, and they huddled there in the deep gloom. A wind stirred and bare branches clacked overhead.

"It's better now," she said. "You needn't carry me."

"Only a little way," said Galt. "Just over the rise."

He lifted her and strode on through the woods. She was so small and so ridiculously light, he could have carried her for miles. He could have carried her forever.

THEY came to the road on the far side of the wood patch and sat on a windfall. He felt the cool smoothness of her cheek brush his, and he turned slowly and kissed her.

"Is it wicked?" she asked softly. "Just this one little minute? We don't know each other. We hardly know each other's name."

"Lee," he said.

"I know. Lee Galt. I saw you write it in the clock. And now even that's gone. We'll never see each other again."

"We'll see each other," he declared hoarsely. "We'll see *lots* of each other!"

"No," she said, "you don't understand. It would never be allowed. You must forget. In a little while you will. And so will I. Lee—Lee Galt. . . ."

She spoke the name lingeringly, as if planting it deep in her memory.

She pressed against him and her head

was thrown back and her wide eyes were fastened upon the cold moon.

"Oh, Lord Jehovah," she whispered, "please don't call it wicked. So much trouble—and this one little minute."

There was a knowledge and sadness in her smile that twisted Galt's heart.

Four men came around a turn in the road, footfalls suddenly and startlingly loud in the chill air. Galt sprang erect, reached down to lift the girl.

"I can walk now," she said. Then: "It's Elder Colton!"

Elder Colton had a knife slash on his cheek. He kept the bloody side of his face away from Mary Proudy.

"Gentile," he said to Galt, "we're beholden to you for taking care of Elder Proudy's daughter."

The men accompanying Elder Colton were armed. They glared at Galt with savage eyes. They formed a tight, protective group about Mary Proudy and went back down the road with her. Galt watched them go. Elder Colton remained before him, blocking his way.

"Gentile," said Elder Colton, "we're beholden to you, so I'm giving you good advice: Don't try to follow us."

"Where's Elder Proudy?" asked Galt.

"He was wounded," answered Elder Colton. "He's safe now. The Gentiles tried to kill him."

A short while ago Elder Colton had offered to share his bed with Galt. Now, he seemed to have forgotten.

"Gentile," he said, "we're a peculiar people. Our ways are not your ways. Get out of these parts as fast as you can." Elder Colton stalked after his companions.

Galt sat down again on the windfall. He was thinking that the word Gentile, as used by a Mormon, meant anyone *not* of their faith.

His shirt was taut across his bent back. His breath lifted in tiny puffs of vapor. He put up his fingers to his cheeks and noted curiously how numb and cold they were. He arose and swung his arms, started walking in the direction taken by Elder Colton.

Beyond the turn, the road forked. Galt chose the right-hand fork and began running. The road was winding and woods-bordered. Ahead of him was a light wagon parked in the road. The driver sat slumped in the seat, his head turned toward Galt. Galt strode forward.

"Did you see some men go by here?" he asked. "There was a girl with them."

The man had a long, mournful face and a cud of tobacco in one cheek. He scrutinized Galt minutely.

"No," he finally answered, "I don't recollect that I did."

"Is this the road to Nauvoo?" asked Galt.

A horse and rider came crashing out of the brush. This was not the same horseman Galt had seen at Proudy's. This was a fat, jolly-looking man with a rifle resting across his saddle pommel.

"Who we got here, Eph?" he said to the wagon driver.

"Don't know," replied Eph. "He just come along. He wanted to know if this is the road to Nauvoo."

"You a Mormon?" demanded the fat man fiercely.

"No," said Galt. "I just asked for the road to Nauvoo."

"Didn't see anything of a Negro along here, did you?"

"No," said Galt.

The fat man sighed. "Doggone!" he said sadly. "I hate to lose that man. Best wood-chopper we ever had, wasn't he, Eph?"

"He wasn't bad," said Eph.

"Ungratefulest Negro I ever see," continued the fat man. "I give him a nice warm cell for all winter and nothin' to do but chop wood, and what does he do the first time Eph forgets to lock him in? He cuts and runs for it!"

"'Twasn't my fault," said Eph. "How'd I know he'd be crazy enough to run off in the winter?"

THE FAT man shook his head. "I sure hate to think of all that wood that needs choppin'." He regarded Galt speculatively. "Kind of a stranger around here, ain't you, son?"

Galt nodded. Then he had a sudden suspicion.

"And no coat, neither," murmured the fat man. "Son, you must be cold. I hate to see that. I hate to see anyone sufferin' in the wintertime . . . . Eph, ain't we got a blanket in the wagon?"

"Guess we do, Sheriff." Eph descended from the wagon.

Galt took a backward step. He turned, dashed for the woods.

Hoofs clattered behind him. The fat man swerved his horse shrewdly and Galt was knocked sprawling.

The moon was describing dizzy rolls in the blue-black sky when Galt sat up. The fat man had dismounted. He was bending over Galt and clucking sympathetically.

"Son," he said, "you hadn't ought to have done it. Resistin' a sworn officer—that's a serious offense."

Galt tried to struggle. Eph was sitting on his legs and tying them with rope. The fat man held Galt's arms in a crushing grip.

"Son," he said reprovingly, "this is no way to act. Here I am, tryin' to do you a favor, and— All set, Eph?"

The two men picked Galt up, carried him to the wagon and laid him in the back end and tied him there. The fat man wrapped a blanket about him.

"In an hour," said the fat man encouragingly, "we'll have you in a nice warm cell. You ain't goin' to have a thing to worry about the rest of the winter. And if this one gets away," he added severely to Eph, "you're goin' to do the wood-choppin' yourself."

"He won't," replied Eph. "I'm goin' to watch this one."

* * * * *

"Son," said the fat sheriff two and a half months later, "I hate to lose you, I swear I do. You turned out to be a right good wood-chopper. You take care of yourself, son."

Lee Galt stood on the steps of the dank little jailhouse. His slender hands were calloused, high-ridged where the ax handle had fitted. He had eight dollars in his pocket. The money had been in his pocket the night the sheriff picked him up. This morning, the sheriff had returned the money. He was an honest sheriff. He was a kindly, jolly-looking sheriff who knew how to keep his woodshed filled.

He stood there, Lee Galt, feeling the sun of late April warm upon his neck and shoulders. His gaze traveled the road that left this drab village and wound off through the greenly bursting countryside.

"That go to Nauvoo?" he asked.

"It'll get you there," said the sheriff. "But the Mormons are gone. They're across the river in Iowa, now. They've made a kind of a camp along Sugar Creek."

"How'll I get across the river?"

"Just follow the road and take the right fork. That'll get you to the river. You'll find someone to ferry you over." The sheriff tapped Galt on the shoulder. "Son," he said earnestly, "don't you fool around no Mormon camp. You take my advice."

Galt began walking. He walked away from that drab village and the jolly-looking sheriff and his not quite so jolly-looking jail. He strode along the narrow road that wound among the lush woods and fields, and the song of birds was in the air and the wild aching throb of spring was all about him.

He walked steadily, hastening and not stopping until the broad, roily waters of the Mississippi were before him. Riding the back of the mighty current were a lumber raft and a slowly turning chicken coop, and far off, hugging the Iowa side of the river, he saw an upbound steamboat with twin stacks and frothing paddles. Close by was a man in a skiff searching for drifting saw-logs.

Galt called, and the man brought his skiff inshore. For fifty cents Galt was ferried across to Iowa.

Here, for a short distance, he followed a road that skirted the river, then the road turned inland. Ambling along behind him came a horse and buggy.

"You want a ride, young feller?" the driver asked.

Galt nodded gratefully. He got into the buggy.

The driver was a huge old man with white, fiercely sprouting eyebrows.

"You one of the Werner boys from upriver?" he asked.

"No," said Galt. He told his name. He asked how far it was to the Mormon camp on Sugar Creek.

"'Bout nine miles," said the old man. "'Bout two miles beyond my place." His own name he said was Abe Zegler. He surveyed Galt out of twinkling, red-rimmed eyes. "You one of the Saints?"

"No," said Galt.

III

OLD ABE made a sweep of his arm, indicating the river behind them. "I seen 'em," he said, "when they crossed over from the Illinois side last winter. Thousands of 'em! It was a

sight to see! Cold, too. Early in February. Why'd they have to chase 'em out of Illinois, burnin' their homes that way? What harm had they done?"

"I don't know," said Galt.

"They come over in skiffs and scows and anything they could get into," said old Abe. "Ice was comin' down the river, too. Later on the river froze over and they walked across on the ice. I took one young girl into my place for awhile. Her feet was froze."

Galt was warm from his walk. He could feel the moisture seeping out from under his hatband.

"Was her name Mary?" he asked.

"I don't think so." Old Abe shook his head. "I don't remember all their names—I took in so many last winter. I hear she died later, poor thing! She wasn't more'n ten or eleven."

Galt leaned back against the seat. He took off his hat and let the breeze stir his damp hair.

"Did you ever happen to run across a Mormon named Proudy?" he asked. "A man about fifty, short and with black whiskers. He had a daughter about eighteen."

"No," answered old Abe, "I don't remember that I did. That the reason you're goin' to Sugar Creek? Someone you know?"

Galt nodded.

The old man's eyes were twinkling again. "The girl, eh?"

"Yes," said Galt, "The girl. A Mormon girl."

Old Abe glanced shrewdly at Galt. He changed the subject. He spoke of California and Oregon and the tide of emigration starting to stream that way. He, Abe Zegler, has lost his wife the previous summer, and he had no children. At seventy-eight he was footloose and free. He, too, was going West. Californy, where the trees were a mile high and it never snowed!

The old man was well-meaning and garrulous. Galt scarcely was listening. He was impatient with the slow progress of the horse.

They turned in at a small farmyard. Galt got out of the buggy and thanked old Abe. The old man pointed.

"'Bout two miles farther down the road," he said. "You can't miss it. But remember," he warned, "they're peculiar people"

Galt hustled on. On his left, paralleling the road, he could see the line of brush and trees that marked Sugar Creek. Presently, activity blossomed by the roadside. Thin-faced children with great serious eyes stared at Galt and retreated as he approached. Women in long poke bonnets were working truck gardens. They glanced up and then quickly averted their gaze. In an open field a dozen slouching men were drilling with guns.

Galt turned off the road toward the creek. He followed a wide slash in the woodland where stumps showed white-topped and glistening in the sunlight. Beyond were parked wagons and carts, tents and bark-and-brush huts and empty ridge poles where tents once had been. He met a man driving an oxcart.

"Where will I find Elder Proudy?" asked Galt. The man looked blankly at Galt and shook his head. Another man was peeling a hickory pole with deft strokes of an ax. He paused to mop his face and grin cheerfully at Galt.

"Where," repeated Galt, "will I find Elder Proudy?"

The man's eyes went blank. He started swinging his ax again. "I don't know," he said over his shoulder.

A girl, maybe fourteen years old, was trying to lug a bucket of water. Galt carried it for her. They walked silently side by side. The girl stopped before a bark hut and Galt set down the bucket. She gave him a shy smile.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"Can you tell me," he asked, "where I'll find Elder Proudy?"

The girl looked down at the heavy bucket. She kept her head bent. "Ask Deacon Hasbrock," she said in a low, quick tone. "That tent right ahead." Abruptly she turned and fled into the hut.

Deacon Hasbrock was a portly man with flowing beard and austere features. He stood before his tent and shook his head in courteous regret.

"No," he said to Galt, "I'm sorry, but I can't help you. Elder Proudy and his daughter are not in this camp."

"Can you tell me then where I can find them?" asked Galt.

The deacon's eyes were bland and remote. "I'm sorry," he said, "but Elder Proudy and his daughter are not in this camp."

"All right," Galt nodded grimly, "but I'm going to make sure!"

"Gentile!" thundered the deacon. "Do you doubt my word? I forbid you in this camp!" And the deacon brushed by as if Galt no longer existed. He stalked majestically away.

A WOMAN came out of the deacon's tent, began sweeping the ground in front of the tent with a willow-twig broom.

"Young man," she said severely, "you ought to know better than that. If the deacon says the Proudys ain't here, they ain't! The deacon never told a lie in his life."

Galt looked at her hopefully. "Maybe you can tell me where I can find them."

The woman did not answer. She continued sweeping.

Galt had a feeling of bewilderment. For some reason a wall of silence seemed to have closed about the Proudys.

"Do you know them?" he asked almost pleadingly. "Are they all right? Can you tell me that much?"

"Oh, yes." The woman nodded. "I know them real well. So far as I know, they're all right." She glanced up with what looked to Galt like a spark of warmth in her darkly veiled eyes. "They're *both* all right," she said with gentle emphasis.

"But you can't tell me where they are?"

The woman swept furiously. Dust arose.

"Yes," she continued ruminatively, "I've known the Proudys a long time. They always believed in independence. Independence is a fine quality, young man."

"Yeah," muttered Galt, "I guess it is."

"That's what a body always looked for in the Proudys—independence."

The broom raised a veritable cloud of dust. Galt coughed and backed away. *Is she crazy?* he thought.

"Gentile!"

A heavy hand was clapped on Galt's shoulder. Galt whirled. He was confronted by a big, burly man in a plaid shirt. A second big man seized Galt's other shoulder. Galt was escorted to the road. The two big men gave him a shove.

"Gentile," said one of the big men, "keep goin'!"

Galt kept going. The sun rested behind him, and his stilted shadow plodded wearily before him. He kept on going until he came back to Abe Zegler's place.

Old Abe leaned against the fence and regarded Galt quizzically.

"Did you find 'em?" he asked.

"No," answered Galt bitterly. "I made a mistake: I doubted Deacon Hasbrock's word."

"Ah," said the old man, "that *was* a mistake. I know the deacon. What happened?"

Galt explained the situation. "Tonight," he said, "I'm going back. I'm going through that camp until I've seen everyone in it!"

"That's no good." Old Abe shook his head. "They ain't in the camp. If Deacon Hasbrock said so, it's true."

"Then where are they?" asked Galt desperately.

"That's hard to tell," answered the old man. "They might be anywhere. Lots of the Mormons have pushed on. They must be strung out half across the state by now. The point is, though, Deacon Hasbrock wouldn't give you any information about these Proudys. That looks to me like they might have been sent on a mission."

"What kind of a mission?"

"A scoutin' mission, sort of. I hear Brigham Young ain't sure yet where he's goin' to take all these folk. He's been sendin' out a few of 'em on the regular wagon trains headin' West. The idea is for them to send back reports on the country."

"But why wouldn't Hasbrock tell me, if that's where they are?"

"And how far," asked old Abe, "d'you suppose a Mormon would go in an Illinois train, if they found out he was a Mormon?"

Not far. Galt knew the black answer to that one.

"You can see," said old Abe, "why the deacon ain't goin' to give information of that kind to a Gentile."

Galt nodded.

"On the other hand," went on old Abe, "this Proudy maybe was sent on a preachin' mission. Maybe he's gone to England or Brazil. Maybe he's anywhere in the world. And if the Mormons won't tell you, you ain't goin' to find out."

Galt was silent. He'd find out. It was merely a matter of patience and time. In the end he'd find out.

"Lee," the old man said, and put his hand on Galt's shoulder, "what you're up against is organization. You're buttin' your head into a stone wall. You better forget that Mormon girl. There's a heap of other girls in the world. Lots of 'em!"

Galt straightened. "Yes," he said, "I guess you're right."

LEE GALT forced a grin for this kindly old man. A grin of careless resignation—a Judas grin. It was a lie, and Lee Galt knew it was a lie. There were no other girls. There was only Mary Proudy. A Mormon girl. A frightened girl running in the night. A girl with a sadness in her smile that twisted into your heart and never would come out.

And you'd bang your head against that stony wall of silence until you crashed through and found her. Or until you could bang no more. But there'd never be another girl.

"What you ought to do," Old Abe was saying, "is go to Californy. That's the place for a young feller. In two weeks you'll forget all about this Proudy girl. You go down to Independence and catch on as a driver on one of the wagons. You won't have no trouble."

"Thank you," said Galt abstractedly. "You've been very kind, Mr. Zegler. I guess I'll be getting along, now."

He started down the road. Where he was going, he wasn't certain. Maybe, after dark, he'd try the camp again. He'd bang his head against that— He halted in midstride. He went back.

"What's the name of that place?" he asked in a strained voice.

"Independence," said old Abe. "That's where most of 'em start out on the Oregon-Californy Trail."

Galt stared at the old man. Actually he didn't see him. What he was seeing was a Mormon woman with a willow-twig broom. A plain, stony-faced woman who had compassion in her heart. A woman who had dared open a crack in that wall of silence.

"So she wasn't crazy," he thought. "She was telling me something. She was telling me where to find the Proudys." The Proudys, she had said, believed in independence. *Independence!*

"Lee," old Abe Zegler was saying earnestly, "I sort of like you. I tell you what you do. You stick around here for a week or two till I get the sale of my farm here settled. Then you go with me to Californy. I can use a spry young feller like you."

"No," said Galt. "Thanks, Mr. Zegler. Thanks a lot. But I got to be going now. I just thought of something."

He went down the road again—seven miles back to the river, And then how far to Independence? How long would it take him to get there? Galt didn't know. He walked quickly, almost running. He forgot that he was tired, that the day was nearly spent. He was hurrying toward the brown, rolling waters of the Mississippi—hurrying while the gloom of evening deepened about him.

* * * * *

"The ratchet is stuck," he said. "That's all your trouble is. Maybe there's grit in it, or the ratchet spring is broke. It's just a tempered wire, I can fix it in a minute."

Lee Galt poked the clock gravely with the tip of a claspknife. The clock sat on the bar in Colonel Noland's tavern in Independence. "That all the tools you need?" asked the tavern man.

"It'll do," Galt said. "I lost my tools."

He freed the ratchet and tightened the spring. He put the works back in the case, and when he wound the clock, it started going. He used a stub pencil and wrote on the clock-paper: *"Repaired by L. Galt, May 2nd, 1846.*

"How much do I owe you?" asked the tavern man.

"Nothing," he said. "I just hate to see a clock not going."

"Have a drink," said the tavern man warmly. "Just help yourself." He set a bottle and glass on the bar.

"Thanks," said Galt. Maybe a few drinks were what he needed. He felt a little chilly. The weather was warm, but he felt chilly.

He had come down the Mississippi to St. Louis on a lumber raft. From St. Louis he had come up the Missouri on a steamboat. He had been in Independence a week, now. He had been through all the wagon camps, he had been everywhere, and the Proudys weren't here.

He wasn't sure what he was going to do now. His eyes burned and there was a dull ache in his head. When he tried to think, his head pained worse.

"You feel all right?" asked the tavern man.

"Sure," said Galt. "I feel fine."

"There's a lot of fever around."

"I feel fine," repeated Galt.

IV

TOSSING off a drink, Lee Galt shut his eyes as the forty-rod shuddered home. He opened his eyes and watched the tavern man set the clock on its shelf. He took a second drink, more slowly this time. He looked about him, became aware of the others in the tavern.

Two soldiers from Fort Leavenworth were drinking beer out of leathern mugs. A Mexican in slashed pantaloons stood discreetly in a corner and rolled a shuck cigaret. A big bullwhacker—a Sante Fe Trail man, Galt judged—was picking his teeth with a bowie knife. At the far end of the room a mountain man in buckskins was trying to sell his services to a group of emigrants.

Two men came along close to Galt.

"I tell you," said one of the men nervously, "they're following me! I got a feeling I'm being watched all the time!"

His companion laughed. "John," he said, "you've been listening to too many stories. There's no such thing as a Danite."

"You pullin' out for Californy pretty quick, Mr. Ritler?" put in the tavern man.

The nervous man jumped and whirled. "Tomorrow," he answered brusquely. He had pale eyes and an unpleasantly narrow face. The man with him—lean and dark almost as an Indian—was still laughing.

"John," he said, "you need bucking up. You come along with me, I know how to take care of what ails you."

He placed his arm on the nervous man's shoulder in the friendliest way possible. The two went out.

"What's a Danite?" asked Galt.

"A Mormon," said the tavern man. "An Avengin' Angel. Mostly, though, I judge it's a lie. They're supposed to be sent out to kill Gentiles the Mormons don't like."

"That would kind of even things up."

"What you say?" The tavern man looked puzzled.

"Nothing," said Galt.

He left the tavern, stepped ankle-deep in mud. The town was swarming with drovers and freighters. The soft May air rang to the beat of hammer and anvil. Merchants and trail outfitters cried their wares. Downriver men, bull-tongued, cried their freedom and exuberance of spirit. Indians stalked and lounged, blanketed and bemedaled, silent and incredibly dirty.

And there were, of course, the movers. No company of penniless adventurers, these, seeking the quick dollar. No vision of easy wealth beckoned at the end of the trail, not at the Oregon end nor the California end. These, for the most part, were solid, rooted men who had torn up their roots with the hopes of transplanting them on the far side of the continent.

Here was itching foot on the grand scale. Here was a national response, rationalized and dignified by the presence of family and possessions, to the legend of new, far places.

They came from New England and from Arkansas, the movers, and they came from points in between. They came up from the steamboat landing on six miles of surfaced road, and they dropped in the mud at Independence. They rolled their great wagons through the mud, and they drove their cattle through. They churned the mud to deep, sticky soup. And they shouted to each other that question of vast enterprise:

"Where you for—Oregon or Californy?"

Galt began drifting along the street. He sought the mud where it was shallowest, trying to avoid the splashings of reckless, hurrying horsemen. He paused by a blacksmith shop. The movers were leading in their mules and oxen. The smiths, bared arms glistening with sweat, worked their bellows and swung their ringing hammers.

A tall man in a red, smocked shirt took Galt's attention. The man had a close-cropped blond beard; he glanced casually at Galt and without interest. Somewhere Galt had seen the man before, but he couldn't remember where.

His head was aching again. He wandered around back of the blacksmith shop and sat on the tongue of a parked wagon. He half closed his eyes and watched the sun dropping below the horizon. The man with the short blond beard came and sat down beside him.

"Do you know me?" he asked.

Beneath the beard Galt saw a knife scar. He knew now where he had seen

this man before. He tried to keep the elation out of his voice.

"Elder Colton," he said.

"Not here," said Colton. "Not 'Elder'."

Galt nodded. He understood well enough: the faceless horsemen still were riding. This was Missouri, the state where six years before the governor, Lilburn Boggs, had issued the ferocious Extermination Order against the Mormons.

"California?" asked Colton. "Oregon?"

"California," said Galt. He had to have a reason for his being here. It wouldn't do to tell Colton the real reason. Not yet. Lee Galt had learned caution. "And you?" he asked casually.

"We're not quite certain. California, I think."

"We?" queried Galt.

"Yes," said Colton. "Elder Proudy is here, too."

And who else?

BUT GALT didn't ask the question aloud. He waited. He gazed across the plain to where the movers were camped eight miles beyond. From here he could see the line of traffic between camp and town, the distant wagons jerking stiffly as if they were cardboard figures drawn by strings.

"I've often thought of you," murmured Colton. "How did you make out that night last winter?"

"I made out all right," said Galt.

"I made out fine, Elder Colton," he was thinking, but left it unsaid. "I spent the winter in jail and I wore out my hands chopping wood and I ate out my heart from wondering and not knowing. Where is she, Elder Colton? Where is she!"

"After they burned out Elder Proudy," said Colton, "the same ones went on to another place. They killed an old man there."

"Four of 'em," Galt muttered. "One on horseback.'

"And three of them are dead now."

Galt stared.

"Dead!" repeated Elder Colton in a deep voice. "All but John Ritler. May the sword of the Angel Moroni strike him!" His eyes held a feverish gleam. He held up a finger. "Only one left—the man that was on horseback. He's here now, in Independence!"

"Ritler? I saw him!" exclaimed Galt. "He was in Noland's tavern. A man with a face like a hatchet. He was with another man—a dark man, handsome."

"Ah," said Elder Colton, and he smiled faintly.

"He said he was going to California—Ritler, I mean."

"I hardly think so." Elder Colton still was smiling. "No," he said, "I don't think John Ritler is going to California."

Galt started to speak, and Colton shook his head. "Don't ask any questions. I've told you enough. Too much, maybe." Colton stood up. He was going to leave.

"Where is she?" Galt cried out, springing up. "Mary, Elder Proudy's daughter. Is she here, too?"

Elder Colton looked at Galt and his gaze seemed to become distant. There it was again—the same, curious expression of blankness that Galt had run into at Sugar Creek. The wall of silence was forming. Then Elder Colton spoke.

"She's dead," he said quietly.

"Dead," muttered Galt. He brushed the back of his hand nervously across his lips. "No," he said with great distinctness, "I guess you didn't understand. I asked after Mary Proudy."

"She died," said Elder Colton, "on the way here. It was this fever, I think. Mary Proudy is dead, Gentile."

"Dead," repeated Galt.

"Yes," said Colton. "I'm sorry, Gentile."

Elder Colton turned and walked away.

Galt sat down again. He watched the far, crawling wagons dipping and jerking as the wheels hit the mudholes. The sun had disappeared. Gray shadow was spreading across the land. He rubbed his eyes. His skin felt hot and dust-dry. He rested his head on his hands. . . .

Someone was shaking him by the shoulder.

"Hey! You sick or something?" said a voice.

Galt raised his head. He was surprised to see how dark it had become. The man's face blurred before him. "No, I'm all right," answered Galt slowly.

The man went on his way, then.

Galt contemplated the sky, moonless and star-studded. The stars grew brighter—and all at once it was night.

"Oh, please don't!" an anguished voice cried behind Galt. "Please don't!"

There was the sound of a blow, of running feet.

Galt got up and approached the darkened rear of the blacksmith shop. A long figure lay on the ground. Galt struck a phosphorous match, looked down into the narrow, contorted face of John Ritler. The man's limbs made stretching movements and then were quiet; his eyes rolled upward. Galt dropped the match.

One of the blacksmiths came from a back door in the building.

"What's goin' on here?" he cried.

Galt laughed softly. The smith bent down.

"Dead!" he ejaculated. "Knifed!"

"No," corrected Galt, "he was struck by the sword of Moroni."

"Moroni?" The smith straightened. He peered at Galt, took a forward step and hesitated. "Hey!" he suddenly bellowed. "Hinky! Bert! Bring a gun! There's murder here!"

Galt slowly retreated. The smith followed cautiously, doubling his wild bellowing. Galt heard the pound of boots. He turned and ran.

"Grab him!" someone yelled. "There he goes! Shoot the darn Mormon!"

A gun roared. There was the whistle of the slug as Galt raced around the blacksmith shop, and the men came howling after him.

He ran on, leaving the wheel-churned mud of Independence and feeling soft, springy sod underfoot. He ran on until pursuit had ceased, and then he changed his pace to a walk. He walked steadily and rapidly out into the moonless night and the open prairie land. He walked until his breath was rasping in his burning throat, and the stars were reeling overhead. He stumbled and fell.

SHAFTS of the early-morning sun and the thin voices of children awakened Galt. He began to shiver, and he couldn't stop. His teeth rattled. He heard the yapping of a dog and the pop of a whip.

He rolled over and lifted his splitting head. He was lying on a slight rise in a bed of tall rosinweed. He lay there shaking and watched the wagons going by, pink-tinted by the sun.

The wagons were toiling over the crest of a far knoll, appearing suddenly, four and five abreast, and fanning out onto the long, rolling grass land.

Flanked by harrying outriders, they progressed in stately confusion, trying to form in parallel lines and not quite succeeding.

Herded along after the wagons, like a mob of small boys following a parade, came the loose livestock.

Some of the movers passed close to Galt. He saw Elder Colton riding a horse. An ox-drawn Conestoga wagon creaked by. A girl in a poke bonnet sat in the rear of the wagon. The girl looked at the concealing bed of rosinweed where Galt lay.

She was a small girl, with large, dark eyes. She was seventeen, maybe eighteen, years old. She looked right at Galt, and she didn't see him because of the rosinweed. Her gaze passed on.

Galt tried to spring to his feet. "Mary!" he shouted. The sound was hoarse and weak. Half arisen, he pitched forward on his face. He pushed himself upright again, staggered out of the weeds.

The Conestoga and the girl in the poke bonnet were gone. The whole wagon train was gone, vanished like a dispelled mirage. The sun flamed down brightly from a position high overhead. The empty grass land stretched away as far as Galt could see. The horizon revolved slowly; it blurred then sprang at Galt with dazzling clarity. He began running after the vanished wagon train.

He ran for a long time. Falling sometimes and resting. Getting up and running on. He saw the wagons in the distance. He was catching up to the train. He ran harder. He stumbled. . . .

Galt lay on his back and looked up into a circle of faces. Beyond the faces he could see the curved outline of a wagon bow. One of the faces drew closer. It was the face of an old man with fiercely sprouting eyebrows—the face of old Abe Zegler.

Lee Galt wasn't surprised to find old Abe in the wagon train. He was past all surprise. He had seen Mary Proudy; he had witnessed resurrection.

"Well," he said, "I caught up with it, didn't I?"

"Caught up with what, Lee?" asked old Abe.

"With you," said Galt petulantly. "With this train you're in. I've been

chasing it all day. I'm tired."

He *was* tired. Fortunately, his head no longer was aching. His head, all of him, felt light as a feather. He closed his eyes and he had a sensation of floating. He heard old Abe's voice as from a great distance.

"Goshal mighty, Lee!" old Abe Zegler was crying. "This ain't no train. This is the wagon camp at Independence!"

V

WHEN Lee Galt opened his eyes he saw overhead a stretch of gray canvas. He had had a good sleep. His eyes moved from side to side. He was lying on a bed in a Conestoga wagon.

His mind was working well, at least better than it had been working yesterday. He thought over what had happened. He had seen Mary Proudy. Elder Colton had lied: Mary Proudy wasn't dead at all. She was in a wagon train. Galt had tried to follow the train, and somehow he had become confused. He had circled back to Independence, and he had run into old Abe Zegler again.

Old Abe had sold his farm and was going to Californy. Californy, where the trees were a mile high!

This must be Abe Zegler's wagon where he was lying now. He was still in Independence! And Mary Proudy was in the wagon train and getting farther away every hour! Somehow, he'd have to get hold of a horse. It was the only way he'd catch up with the train.

He started to arise. He fell back, panting. He looked at his hand; it was bone-thin. He rubbed his chin; he had a beard.

Old Abe's face appeared abruptly at the back end of the wagon. Old Abe was grinning.

"So you're finally takin' notice," he said. "I was beginnin' to get discouraged. How you feelin'?"

"Fine," said Galt. His voice was a whisper. He kept rubbing his bearded chin. He knew, now: It wasn't yesterday, nor was it the day before that. "How long?" he asked. "What was it—the fever?"

"Yep," said old Abe, "that's it. It's pretty nigh to three weeks now. You had it good!"

Three weeks!

"The wagon train?" Galt whispered.

"You mean the one you said you was chasin'?" Old Abe was grinning again. "'Tain't so far ahead. You've been on the Oregon Trail yourself for about two weeks."

Another face appeared beside old Abe—a dark, stern face. It was the face of the man Galt had seen with John Ritler in Noland's tavern at Independence.

"How is he?" asked the man.

"Good," said old Abe. "He's finally got his senses."

The man addressed Galt: "You used to work for old Abe?"

"I told you he did," Zegler said. "Lee's a good boy. Good Baptist folks." He winked tremendously at Galt.

"Yes," said Galt. "I used to work for old Abe."

The man went away.

"That's Conrad Fain," said Abe. "He's wagon captain. You don't want to mention Mormons around him. He hates 'em!"

Sometimes, when folks had the fever, they did a lot of crazy talking. Galt wondered how much talking he had done. Later on, he asked old Abe.

"Yep," said Abe. "You did sort of run off about that Mormon girl. But don't let it worry you—no one heard but me. And me"—he grinned—"I'm a free-thinker and bound for damnation sure!"

Galt told the old man all that had happened in Independence.

"And you think Colton killed this Ritler," said Abe finally.

Galt was silent. That was what he thought.

"The way it looks to me," said the old man, "Ritler had it comin' to him. Actually, you don't know who killed him. If I was you, I'd keep quiet about it. Especially since Fain was a sort of friend of Ritler. He might think you had something to do with it."

Galt nodded. He wasn't interested in who had killed Ritler—Ritler, the faceless horseman! Ritler could be riding through hell for all he, Lee Galt, cared. And good hunting to the devil!

They were camped for the night. There were nineteen wagons in this little train, and they had been on the trail a month, now. Galt scowled and rubbed his chin; he no longer had a beard.

"But why," he asked, "did Colton tell me Mary Proudy was dead?"

Abe shook his head. "They're peculiar

people—I told you that. And maybe—I hate to say this, Lee—he was tellin' the truth."

"But I saw her!" Galt cried out.

"You had the fever, Lee."

Galt stirred at the dying cook-fire. He had seen Mary Proudy. Fever or no, he had seen her. She was alive, somewhere ahead on the Oregon Trail.

CONRAD FAIN strode by and Galt spoke to him. "How long," he asked, "before we catch up with the train we're following?"

"Pretty soon, now," the wagon captain said, breaking stride.

He was a spare, humorless man in his middle thirties. Beyond the vague fact that he was an Illinois man, the emigrants didn't know much about him. But they knew enough; they knew a leader when they saw one. Conrad Fain was a man of iron purpose. The emigrants had faith in him. If anyone could get them to Californy, Conrad Fain was the man.

"We'll catch up with it and pass it," said Fain. "A big train moves too slow. They'll hit snow in the mountains sure. I hear," Fain went on, "that you were trying to follow that train. Someone in it you know?"

He looked intently at Galt. Lee stared back at him.

"No," he answered firmly.

"Lee had the fever," put in old Abe. "He didn't know what he was doin'."

"Didn't he?" Fain continued to gaze at Galt. His somber eyes reflected the glow of the sinking fire.

"He's a good wagon captain," said Abe, after Fain was gone, "but he's like the rest of these Illinois folks—hell on Mormons. If you run into those Mormon friends of yours, you want to be careful and not give 'em away."

Galt nodded. He intended to be careful. There was a darkness about this Fain—not of the skin, but an inner darkness—that he sensed and distrusted.

They caught up with the train ahead, finally. It was stalled along the North Platte. Here, parked in a huge, sprawling oval, were perhaps two hundred wagons, some bound for Oregon and some for California. Dogs barked and children squealed as the little string of Illinois movers pulled into the camp. Once again Galt heard the familiar cry: "Where you for—Oregon or Californy?"

Galt helped old Abe with the oxen. He carried water. He gathered willow brush and buffalo chips. He left Abe at the wagon.

It was late of a warm afternoon. Galt moved slowly among the tents and wagons, peering about him. He was searching for Elder Colton or Elder Proudy. Or a small girl in a poke bonnet. There were poke bonnets aplenty. They were, Galt discovered to his embarrassment, somewhat like tunnels. You had to look directly into the entrance to see what was at the other end.

"Hunting someone, Lee?"

It was Conrad Fain. He had come up behind Galt. A faint smile of amusement lightened his stern visage.

"No," replied Galt. "Just looking around."

Galt returned to the wagon. "Fain!" he said bitterly.

Old Abe nodded. "He's a suspicious rascal. He seems to have his doubts about you. I don't know why. You stay here—I'll see if I can find out anything for you."

Galt leaned against the wagon. He watched Zegler move out into the camp. Old Abe wasn't as brisk as he had been. This trip had been hard on him. He was seventy-eight and he was "going to Californy where the trees—" He was a fine old man, Abe.

Galt thought of that bleak February night back in Illinois, and of the woman who had hidden him and Mary Proudy from the mob. And of the woman with the willow-twig broom at Sugar Creek. And he thought again of Abe Zegler who had nursed him through the fever. There were a lot of queer, fine people in the world.

There were also the John Ritlers of this world!

"Found 'em," old Abe said, returning. "I didn't see 'em, but I found out they're here." He waved his hand. "Down at that end of the camp. Colton and Proudy and—his daughter. You better wait till dark before you hunt 'em up."

Galt nodded. He rubbed his sweating palms on his pants. His voice was very calm:

"I told you I saw her. Didn't I tell you?"

"You told me." Old Abe looked

strangely, almost pityingly, at Galt. He seemed about to say more, then turned away. "I guess," he muttered wearily, "I'll stretch out awhile."

NIGHT came; Galt moved along the camp. Somewhere in the dark he heard a child wailing fretfully. Somewhere a family group was trying to sing, a nasal keening that was more depressing than the cry of the child.

Occasionally, as he passed the tents and fires, he overheard bits of conversation. ". . . the danged Pawnees . . . three hundred yet to the Sweetwater . . . b'golly, if I'd knowed when I started . . ."

Conrad Fain, Galt decided, had been right—a big train was too slow. The big train had lain at this spot for two days now, supine and starchless like a pummeled fat boy. It was fever-weakened and ague-shaken.

The happy confusion, the spirit of adventure, with which the movers had started was gone. They had come, perhaps, five hundred miles. Behind them were the forks of the Platte, the Big Blue and the Vermilion—and a scattering of graves. Now they were weary and contentious. A good many, Galt guessed, would be willing to turn back right now. Others, like old Abe Zegler, would never give up.

Abruptly, Galt halted. He had come upon Elders Proudy and Colton. They were standing by the rear of a wagon. They looked at Galt with no show of surprise. He had the feeling that they had been awaiting him, that they had known of his presence in the wagon train.

The squat, black-bearded Proudy shook hands. "Naturally I remember you," he said. He was formally polite. "Mary!" he called.

She appeared in the back end of the wagon. She stood there in that place of elevation, the red glow of a near-by campfire showing the contour of her body and throwing shadow upward across throat and cheek.

Galt gazed at her. He filled his eyes with her. Vaguely he was aware that Proudy was speaking again.

"Mary, do you remember this man?" asked Proudy.

"I remember him very well," she said. "He's the clock man."

Galt started. He felt the cold probing of fear, and a nameless horror. Was that Mary Proudy who had spoken—that flat, alive-dead voice?

"Mary!" he cried out to her.

She made no answer. She was like an image of stone. Colton's eyes were blank, as were Elder Proudy's. They seemed to be contemplating something far off in the night. Galt glanced over his shoulder; he was confronted by the gloomy countenance of Conrad Fain.

"Found someone you know, Lee?" murmured Fain.

"No," Galt replied hoarsely. "I was just talking to them."

"My name is Proudy," said the elder. "Sam Proudy."

"And mine is Conrad Fain. I'm captain of the little train that pulled into camp today."

Fain swept off his hat. He was gazing with luminous eyes at the girl in the wagon.

"This is my daughter—Mrs. Colton," said Proudy.

"And my wife," said Colton.

Galt moved off. What mumbled words of parting he had uttered, he didn't know. He sought refuge in the black shadow of a near-by wagon. He paused there, seeing remotely, thinking remotely.

"You should have believed me, Gentile." It was Colton coming into the shadows beside Galt. "You shouldn't have followed."

"You lied," said Galt. "You told me she was dead!"

"Wasn't it kinder that way?" asked Colton gently.

"You lied once," said Galt. "How do I know now?"

Colton left him. He returned with Mary.

"Tell him," he said.

"We were married," she said. "He is my husband."

A disembodied voice speaking through stone, Lee Galt thought. The closing of the terrible wall of silence. . . . The empty ripple where the straw of hope had been. . . .

"I'm sorry, Gentile," said Colton.

Galt went back to old Abe's wagon. "She's married," he said.

"I know," old Abe said. "I heard that. I'm a coward—I didn't have the heart to tell you." He cleared his throat. "After awhile, you forget."

Fain came along, then. "You're on guard, Lee. "I'll show you where."

VI

GALT got old Abe's rifle out of the wagon. He followed Fain up a gradual hill-slope. The sounds of the camp became a murmur behind them. They stopped at the crest-line of the hill.

"I keep thinking," said Fain, "that somewhere I've seen you before—before you joined up with the train."

"In Noland's tavern," Galt informed him. "You were there with another man."

"I recollect now." Fain nodded. "That man with me was killed by the Mormons. Stabbed by a murdering Danite!"

Galt remembered the assurance Fain had given Ritler. "There's no such thing as a Danite," he said.

"No? I wonder. . . . Well, keep your eyes open for Indians."

He turned and went down the hill.

Galt lay in the grass, the rifle beside him. He propped his chin on his hand and peered into the night. There wasn't much to see; only a pool of shadows and the line of another hill-crest a few hundred yards distant. That—and the moving shadows in his mind.

After awhile you forget, old Abe had said. But Abe was wrong. There are things you *never* forget. A home burning in the night. The cry of the mob. A kiss beneath the cold February moon, and a Mormon girl's whispered prayer for understanding. *Oh, Lord Jehovah, please don't call it wicked. So much trouble—and this one little minute.*

Ah, no, there was no wickedness there. Only beauty and a tender sadness. In Galt's memory the minute still ticked on. It was suspended and timeless, and all the turning wheels in all the clocks in the world couldn't pass it by. One little minute. . . .

They came at dawn, just as the sky was paling and the far hillcrest was as sharp beneath it as an ink-drawn line. They came in a scudding mass, up from the hidden recesses of the Plains, straight out of the paling sky like a whirling storm fragment.

These were something different from the Shawnee and Kansa that lounged about the streets of Independence. These were roached-head Pawnee, and they meant business. They came on without a sound save the mounting drum of their little cat-footed horses.

Galt jerked up his rifle and fired. Two more guns banged where camp guards were stationed farther along the ridge.

"Indian! Indian! Here they come!"

Galt and the other guards raced for the wagon trains. The camp had stirred to life. There was a rattling among wagon-boxes and a vast surge of voices. Dogs barked and roosters commenced a joyful crowing.

The Indians came suddenly screeching over the ridge the guards had just vacated. It wasn't a large band of raiders, but when they began their noise, they multiplied enormously. They sounded like the avenging fury of the whole Plains.

Guns blazed behind the parked wagons. Galt heard a whisper and whine in the air, felt a searing touch to the crown of his head, and he dived to the ground.

The Indians swept quartering down the slope, away from Galt and toward a bunch of Missouri mules that had been night-herded outside the wagon corral. The mules stampeded. They charged through a row of tents and crashed against the wagons.

Fire brands spurted. Tents weaved, collapsed into the gray darkness. Guns cracked. The Indians howled like wolves and gobbled like demented women. All at once a wagon became a tower of flame.

In the quick burst of light Galt saw an indescribable confusion of rocking wagons, fear-crazed livestock, scantily-clad movers and wildly cavorting Indians.

And as suddenly as they had come, the raiders departed.

Galt went on toward the camp. Fain reared up before him, gun in hand.

"All right, Lee?" he questioned.

Galt took off his hat. There was a bullet hole in it. There was a smear of blood in his hair. He looked at Fain.

"The bullet came from somewhere in this direction," he said.

Fain nodded. "An accident. I nearly caught one, too. Someone at the wagons must have mistaken us for Indians."

Galt entered the camp. Briefly, in the light of the beginning day, the movers were boisterous. They had been salted. They had, b'golly, taught the danged savages a lesson! As evidence of their victory they had acquired an Indian.

Galt saw him, the dead Pawnee,

crumpled against a wagon wheel. He had streaks of vermilion on his cheeks, and his head was shaven except for a center roach of long, bristly hair. A lanky mover was brandishing a knife. He was proclaiming in a high Tennessee whine that he was going to clip him a Pawnee ear for a pocket-piece.

The wagon corral was broken in several places. A large number of the mules and horses were gone, departed with the raiders. Here and there Galt saw arrows on the ground or sticking into wagons. A few were sticking into droop-headed, patient-eyed oxen.

Movers were drifting together in groups. Their boisterousness was fading, now. They were taking count of the damage. Galt carried the rifle back to Abe Zegler's wagon.

Old Abe was stretched out on blankets on the ground. Someone told Galt that the little man bending over Abe was Doc Hunsaker of the Missouri outfit. Doc Hunsaker was extracting an arrow from old Abe's thigh.

IT WAS night again. The horn lantern cast a dim glow within the wagon. Fain's glance flicked from Galt to old Abe.

"The way it looks now," said Fain, "the big train is going to be stalled here for awhile. The Missouri outfit has lost its mules, and some of the rest want to hold an election for a new train-master. We're going on. A few of the Illinois families are going with us. How about you, Abe?"

"Goshalmighty!" cried Abe from his bed in the wagon. "I started for Californy, didn't I? This little arrer wound ain't goin' to stop me. Sure, me and Lee are comin' along!"

Fain nodded to Galt. "Tomorrow we'll go after buffalo. We'll load up with as much jerked meat as we can." He started to leave the wagon, paused. "By the way," he said to Galt, "your friend Proudy and the Coltons are coming with us."

Galt thought of the long trail ahead. So each day now he would see her—and Colton! On to Californy! And each day marked by a slow twisting of the knife. Why had Fain told him? Did Fain know? He gazed flatly at the wagon captain. Once again he had a warning sense of strange darkness in this man.

Fain smiled sardonically. He disappeared into the night.

There were fifteen men in the hunting party the next day. Like Galt and the black-bearded Proudy, most of the men carried only a rifle or smoothbore. A few, like Fain and Colton, had Dragoon pistols.

They parked their empty wagon behind a sandhill. Before them the land rolled away in a series of grassy swells and draws. And everywhere, like crawling flies, were the buffalo.

They scrambled around the hills in files and columns, the buffalo. Some stepped out briskly and some moved slowly, grazing. And some just stood dumbly.

"Remember, it's the cows we want," said Fain. "Try for a lung shot. And don't stampede 'em more'n you can help."

The hunters rode forward through the rank grass. They weren't experts, but they knew what to do: You shoot 'em in the lungs, and they go down. You cut off the tails for trophies, and you take a drink of the blood to prove you're a Plainsman. Then you go in, elbows deep, and peel out the meat. Tongue and hump ribs for supper!

Galt saw a wolf slink along a draw ahead of him. An antelope poked up his little horns and white throat and peered with black, inquisitive eyes, then breezed away. A bull buffalo came snorting to his feet, glared redly out of a tangled mane and lumbered off.

Galt sprang from the saddle, sighted on a line of buffalo and shot. The bison broke into a gallop. Galt reloaded. Abruptly, one of the cows stopped running. It stood still, tottered, then fell heavily. A bull sniffed at it, and a second bull came along and butted the first bull in the rear.

Galt swung into the saddle again. On either side of him sounded the guns of the hunters. The buffalo were hastening away, converging to make a massed formation. Dust was rising.

The hunters took after the buffalo, and the animals began traveling in earnest, short tails rigidly erect. Galt swerved his horse close to another cow and shot her on the run.

Their stampeding numbers constantly augmented, the bison were channeled now between a double line of hills, much as a river is channeled between its banks. They closed in about Galt and

hurried him along. Dust was a choking, almost impenetrable fog. Horns clicked and rattled. Thousands of hoofs made a dull jarring of the earth.

On the slope to his left and paralleling the course of the herd, Galt glimpsed occasionally the wildly charging hunters, saw the noise-drowned flash of their guns. Behind him, caught in the press of the stampede, were Elders Proudy and Colton. And yonder came Fain, his stern features cleaving through the rolling dust like some gloomy spirit of the Plains.

The hill-lines receded and the herd began to spread out. Galt worked his horse into the clear. The buffalo rushed on by, tails up, heads down, their dark, flowing masses half-hidden in the dust spume. He turned his horse and started back.

Here and there he passed a dead buffalo, shapeless and with lolling tongue. Most of the hunters had escaped being caught in the stampede. He could see them ahead of him now, coming down along the hill-slopes, forming a group about an object that was not a dead buffalo.

Galt reached the group and dismounted. He watched three of the hunters lifting what was left of Elder Colton.

THEY carried the body to a hillside and deposited it carefully on a clean grass patch. A man wiped his lips and spat out caked dust.

"Right down under 'em!" he said. "His horse must've stumbled."

"Get the wagon, Charlie," ordered Conrad Fain.

The man got on his horse and rode off. Fain moved with sudden, nervous energy.

"All right," he said. "We've got to get to work on the buffalo. You've all got knives. Start in on the first ones and work this way. . . . Proudy, I guess you'll want to stay here with Colton till the wagon comes."

The hunters rode off. All but Elder Proudy. Galt lingered behind the others, turned and went back. He dismounted again beside Colton's body. He gazed down at that trampled grotesquery of a man and tried to analyze thought and feeling. But there was no feeling—only a husked emptiness.

Colton was gone. And what had been his, Colton had taken with him, had surrounded with the inviolability of the grave.

"I'm not a vulture," Galt was thinking drearily. "I can't pick dead bones!"

For the gibbering bones would arise again.

"He'd be there," he thought. "Always!"

Elder Proudy was squatted by Colton's dead horse. He was beating dust from the hide with his hat. He put on his hat again.

Galt stepped up behind Proudy. He saw why Colton's horse had stumbled: a bullet hole in the shoulder of the dead animal.

"An accident," muttered Proudy. "A wild shot."

Galt remembered the charging hunters beside the stampeding buffalo, the flashing guns. A wild shot—and there was a widow in the wagon train. A small girl with great, midnight eyes.

Proudy picked up a handful of dust and covered the bullet hole. "There's no need for the others to know," he said. "Nothing would be accomplished." He stood up and brushed off his hands. "An unfortunate accident."

Galt thought of that other accident, the one that had left the bullet hole in his hat. Did Proudy know the answer? He gazed steadily at the elder.

Proudy returned the gaze with curiously blanked stare.

Galt knew the signs, now. The barrier was up. It was the wall of silence again, the moving of nebulous forms in the darkness.

"Lee," murmured Elder Proudy, "it might be better if you were to stay with the main train, not go along with us."

"I'm going along," Galt said.

He wasn't asking much, and he never would now. But when the forms of darkness took shape, when Mary needed his help again—when that time came he was going to be there. That much neither Proudy nor the dead Colton could deny him.

VII

AT DAWN, two days after the buffalo hunt, the Illinois movers pulled out of the camp—a little string of twenty-two wagons hitting the Oregon-California Trail, buckets swinging, chickens squawking in their coops, sheets of drying jerky hung on rawhide lines.

Galt popped his whip and old Abe's oxen pushed into their yokes. They plodded after the dust-dripping wheels of Elder Proudy's wagon.

It crawled slowly, the little string of wagons, humping over the swells, dipping into the draws and laboriously reappearing, a feeble unit of motion, dwarfed against the vast, sky-limited spaces that surrounded it. Behind it the encampment of the stalled big train gradually dwindled in size; the parked wagons drew together and were a clump of gray mushrooms in the distance.

Old Abe Zegler lay on the bed in his wagon. His gaunt head was rocked from side to side by the sway of the vehicle. Laughter rumbled in the old man's throat. He was on his way again —on to Californy!

"Ten days to Fort Laramie," he said. "Want to bet, Lee?"

"No," said Galt, "I guess not."

He glanced over his shoulder at old Abe. Abe's arrow wound was clean, but it wasn't healing. The old man had become markedly thinner in the past few days.

The little wagon train made fifteen miles the first day, and on the second day, slowly they continued westward.

Chickens were languishing in their coops from the dust and heat; the movers began killing them. One night Mary brought a bowl of chicken stew for Abe. The old man sat up in his bed and polished off the stew with a fine clattering of his spoon. He could eat like fury, but it wasn't putting any meat on his bones.

"He's getting thinner," said Mary. "Is it the arrow wound?"

"It's something else," said Galt. "There's nothing to be done. I talked with Doc Hunsaker before we left camp."

"You shouldn't have brought him along."

"He wants to go on," replied Galt. "Doc Hunsaker told me that it wouldn't make any difference if he went or stayed."

"Go back!" she whispered tensely. "Get out of the train! Not for him alone—for both of you!"

"Why?" asked Galt. "What will happen if I don't?"

She didn't answer.

They were standing a little distance from the wagon, were enveloped in the soft dimness of the night. She was very close. He could have reached out and touched her. Between them was the wall of silence—the raised hand of a dead man.

"You're afraid of something," Galt said shortly. "What is it?"

She shook her head. Abruptly, she whirled and hurried off.

"A pleasant night," a voice spoke behind Galt.

He turned slowly, watched the lean form of Conrad Fain going by with quiet tread.

"Yes," he answered quietly.

The movers reached Fort Laramie. Ahead lay South Pass, backbone of the continent. Three hundred miles.

"South Pass in twenty days!" said old Abe.

His cheeks had fallen flat against his jaws. The seams of his skull showed under the sallow skin of his forehead. His red-rimmed eyes were cavernous.

"The old man's dying," said Fain to Galt. "You two had better stay here at the fort."

"He wants to go on," replied Galt.

Fain nodded. "It's your funeral, Lee."

The movers pulled out of Fort Laramie. They went out into the volcanic barrens. They passed Laramie Peak and crossed Wagonhound Creek. Three days later they were following close again to the North Platte. They crawled through heat-filled, bowl-like valleys. Beyond were towering buttes and a jagged sky line. In the distance they glimpsed the Wind River Mountains.

Leaving the North Platte, they turned southwest, rolled down into the valley of the Sweetwater. White, bitter dust inflamed their eyes and cracked their lips. The patient oxen breathed in the dust and grew leaner.

Galt no longer drove from the wagon seat. He walked with the oxen and his feet were scalded, and wherever raw places formed the terrible white dust bit in like acid.

Old Abe lay helpless in the suffocatingly hot wagon. His arrow wound remained clean and unhealed.

Wheels shrank in the extreme dryness. Because the movers had no blacksmith along to shorten the tires, they had to tighten them with wedges. Some of the oxen died, which was disaster.

"Lighten the wagons," ordered Fain.

The movers lightened their wagons. They heaved out heavy tables and chests of drawers that had been prized family possessions. Some of the women complained, and then, in tearful desperation, discarded pots, pans and iron skillets—things which they should have kept.

"Three more days to South Pass," said Conrad Fain.

Old Abe lay in the wagon and chuckled. "Three days," he said. "Californy or bust!"

The little train began climbing. The trail went inexorably upward. The air grew thin and men panted without exertion. Then the trail leveled again, and the wagons had crossed to the watershed of the Green River, and the Sweetwater was behind them.

HERE, on either side, rearing up from the depths below and projecting into the sky, the movers saw huge, purple-domed peaks, cloud-hung and snow-streaked. Here they drank from a spring which sent its divided water into both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Here they had reached the summit of South Pass.

The trail was downgrade now, and the oxen moved along without apparent effort. The movers climbed in the wagons and rode.

Galt glanced over his shoulder. "All right, Abe?"

He received no answer and stopped the wagon. Mary came running back from Proudy's wagon. She and Galt looked in at the old man. Abe's eyes were closed, he was breathing sharply.

The movers behind Galt had halted. They made a solicitous group about the Conestoga.

"What's the holdup here?" Fain pulled up on his horse.

"We'll have to wait," Mary told him. "Abe Zegler's dying."

"Wait for one old man?" exclaimed Fain. "No! We can do five more miles yet today. We'll bury him tonight when we stop."

The girl turned and walked away.

"You were told not to come along," said Fain curtly to Galt. "You can't hold up the whole train."

"Did I ask you to hold up? Clear out!" Galt shouted thickly. "All of you! Go on! Let me alone!"

"Get to your wagons," Fain ordered. "Lee Galt can catch up again."

Galt tied Abe's oxen a little way from the wagon. The last of the movers disappeared around a bend in the trail. He went back to the Conestoga. Mary was sitting in there beside the old man.

"I wanted to help," she murmured.

"They'll come back for you."

She shook her head. "They won't know I'm missing until tonight. Father thinks I'm riding with the Jenkins."

Old Abe suddenly opened his eyes. "Where's Lee?" he muttered.

"Here, Abe." Galt got in the wagon.

"Lee," whispered Abe, "everything I got in yours. In that chest over there—eight hunnered dollars. Yours, Lee." He shut his eyes again, frowned. "Come close. You still there?"

"I'm still here, Abe," Galt answered in a choked voice.

"Busted, Lee. Busted, by golly!"

The old man chuckled quietly. His breathing became sharper. Shallower. Then stopped.

Mary found a prayer book in the wagon, and she read the burial service. It was evening when Galt finished mounding the grave. He leaned upon the shovel. Mary stood beside him.

Above them, the mountain peaks flamed coldly in the last rays of a departed sun. So far, old Abe's stalwart spirit had carried him on, and here, on this high and lonely spot, he had stopped. It was, thought Galt, a peculiarly fitting place for old Abe's tired body to rest.

"And he wanted so to see California," said the girl sadly.

"He'll see it," answered Galt. "He'll get there."

They yoked up the oxen and went on. They rode together in the seat of the Conestoga. It was night then, and a huge mountain moon sailed up as bright as frosted silver—as bright as it was on that long-ago February night in Illinois.

Galt kept his gaze on the trail ahead. Beside him he heard a stifled sob. The girl's voice ran out to him, muted and tremulous:

"I lied, Lee. I can't go on with it. Elder Colton wasn't my husband. He was my uncle—my mother's brother."

He sat completely motionless, watching Elder Colton sink back into his grave, realizing that his ghost was laid forever. "Why?" he asked patiently,

then. "Why did you lie, Mary?"

"Father and Elder Colton didn't want you to follow us. They—we were afraid. I was afraid—"

Her words trailed off into the thin stillness of the night. Her shoulder brushed his in a fleeting, trembling touch.

"And you're still afraid," he said. "What are you afraid of, Mary Proudy? Who are you afraid of?"

She was silent. Retreating. Taking refuge behind the wall of silence.

WITHOUT hurry, without lagging, the oxen plodded onward. The creak of the wagon wheels was a weak and solitary sound. Here and there along the route were the skeletons of mules and cattle, dull white in the moonlight and glowing with a pale phosphorescence where the shadows fell.

The trail made a sudden turning. Close before them Galt saw the fires of the camped wagon train.

"Do you remember," he asked, "that windfall in the woods and how cold it was? I didn't notice the cold, not then. You said that in a little while we would forget. Have you forgotten, Mary?"

He waited, not looking at her. The camp drew closer; there was singing and the nostalgic plunking of a banjo.

"Have you forgotten?" Galt asked again.

"No," she whispered. "No, clock man. You know I haven't."

He turned and held her tight.

"What have I done?" Her voice was despairing, muffled against his shirt. "You'll never leave the train now. You must! You'll be killed!"

"Why? Because of you?" He tilted her head until he could see the soft curve of her cheek. "Who will kill me?"

"*He* will! He's been— Oh, Lord of Zion!" she cried. "There he is now!"

She pushed away from him. Her eyes were wide pools of terror.

The oxen halted. Shadow figures were coming from the fires to the wagon.

"Did old Abe die?" someone asked.

"Yes," Galt answered.

"Mary, you had no business to run off like that!" Elder Proudy was at the wagon. "Get down, girl!" he ordered sternly.

Mary climbed out of the wagon. Conrad Fain stood beside Proudy.

"Lee, you're on guard tonight," he said. "Eat first, then I'll show you where."

Galt parked the wagon and ate. He got out his rifle. He held the rifle ready in the crook of his arm and followed Fain away from the camp.

Fain waved his hand toward the hillslope beyond. "Up there," he directed. He wheeled abruptly and went back to the camp.

Climbing the hill, Galt lay down in a shadowed hollow at the crest. Below him the fires of the encampment began to die out. The singing and banjo plunking had ceased. The wagon train slept. The moon slid westward. . . .

Galt arose to his knees. He swung his rifle around.

"Everything all right, Lee?"

Fain came into the hollow beside him. Fain, who carried the responsibility of the train, making sure that his guards were alert. He was empty-handed, without gun or pistol. His coat flapped loosely open.

"Did you think I was an Indian?" he asked.

The moonlight showed the wagon captain's faint smile. Smiling, he pushed aside the muzzle of Galt's rifle. He gripped the rifle in both hands as Galt tried to pull it away.

"Now wait," he said softly. "Wait, Gentile. Listen to what I have to say."

"Gentile?" Galt stopped tugging at the rifle. He knelt there quietly, peering up at this lean, sardonic-visaged man, this form taking shape out of the darkness. "Gentile?" Galt said again.

"That's it, Lee."

Galt's thoughts ran back to the first time he had seen Fain, in the tavern at Independence with John Ritler. Ritler's nervousness and the laughter of Fain. Fain with his friendly, reassuring arm upon Ritler's shoulder. Ritler dying behind the blacksmith shop.

"So it wasn't Colton then who killed Ritler," said Galt.

"No," replied Fain, "it wasn't Elder Colton who did that."

"Why tell me this?" asked Galt.

"Once," continued Fain, "I tried to kill you, too. The morning the Indians came. The bullet through your hat—remember? I had found out that you knew the Proudys, and I was afraid you would give them away. But Elder Proudy swore you could be trusted. So after that"—Fain smiled again, gently, de-

precatingly—"so after that I didn't try anymore to kill you."

VIII

COLD crawling at the back of his neck brought Galt to his feet. He held tight to the butt of the rifle so Fain couldn't jerk it from him.

"Why tell me this?" he persisted.

"So you'll understand that I mean what I say," replied Fain. "Tomorrow when we go on, five of the wagons are staying here till the next train comes along. Their oxen need rest. So do yours, Lee."

"No," said Galt through the darkness.

"Yes," said Fain. "The Mormon girl is not for you, Lee. You understand now why you'll stay behind."

"Is that why Colton stayed behind?"

"What?" Fain gave an almost imperceptible start.

"You were carrying a pistol that day. Was it a pistol bullet," asked Galt, "that made Colton's horse stumble?"

Fain looked steadily at Galt. His contemplative gaze took on a sort of volcanic glow. One hand reached under his coat. Galt saw the drawing sheen of the edged steel, flung himself at Fain, grabbing for his wrist.

"Gentile!" Fain surged forward.

The rifle dropped between the two men and banged on Galt's shin. He tripped and was borne backward. He landed on his shoulders and neck with Fain on top of him. He heard the clean, soft *snick* as the knife drove into the earth by his cheek.

Fain knelt on Galt's stomach. With one hand he throttled Galt, while with the other hand he strove to wrest the knife from the ground.

Galt held both of Fain's wrists. He tried to push the knife deeper into the ground, tried to break the grip on his throat.

Conrad Fain wasn't a large man, but he was strong. He was all sinew and purpose. The fingers clamped about Galt's windpipe were enclosing pincers. Slowly, outmatching Galt's straining effort, Fain withdrew the knife from the earth, lifted the weapon above Galt.

As desperately as he had opposed the ascent of the knife, Lee Galt now opposed its descent. He shook Fain's wrist, tried to wring the knife from his grasp. He tore at the fingers digging into his throat. Inexorably Fain pressed the blade downward.

Galt was strangling. He kicked and squirmed. Fain refused to be dislodged; he rode Galt like some terrible monster of the night. Galt felt the knife point thrusting against his neck, dimpling the skin. He gazed straight up into Fain's convulsed features, his glaring eyes.

Above Fain, starkly outlined across the night sky, he saw a furiously leaping figure, saw the glinting arc of a swung gunbarrel, heard the plopping crash as it struck Fain's head.

Galt rolled on his side. He rubbed his throat, gasping, gulping in air. Dimly he was aware of a bearded face bending anxiously over him. Elder Proudy was speaking.

"I was afraid of this," Proudy said. "I saw him leave camp and I had an idea he might be up to something. You're not hurt, are you, Lee?"

"I m all right," Galt wheezed.

Lee Galt was fine. His throat was on fire, he was still dazed from his peep into eternity. Nevertheless, he was fine. He sat up and squinted at the crumpled, motionless Fain.

"Dead," pronounced Elder Proudy in a sepulchral voice.

"Did he know that Mary wasn't married to Colton?" Galt asked.

"So she told you, did she?" Proudy shook his head. "No, Fain didn't know that. He was a dangerous man and he had a certain reputation with women. Colton and I felt that for Mary's protection, we should—"

"And do you still think Colton's death was accidental?" Galt broke in.

"I don't know," Proudy answered evasively. "It's difficult to believe. One of his own people. It's something we'll never know."

Galt got the impression that Elder Proudy didn't want to know, that Elder Proudy was glad he never would know.

Proudy picked up the knife that lay beside Galt. He held it a moment, pondering, then he shoved it under his belt.

"Perhaps," he murmured, "it would be better if nothing of this was known in the camp. Explanations might be complicated."

Galt nodded. He got the point exactly. But how, he wondered, did you con-

ceal the fact of a dead man? Elder Proudy strode over to Fain. His squat form bent. When he rose, Fain's body was slung across his shoulders.

Galt kept rubbing his throat. He watched the burdened Proudy march briskly off along the slope, away from the camp, vanishing in the far shadows.

Farewell to Fain, Galt thought. Dark Saint. Out of the darkness. Into the darkness again. . . .

ELDER PROUDY was gone a long time. Galt lay on his back waiting. gazing up at the paling stars. Was it that late? That early? Daylight so soon?

The sky lightened. From the camp Galt heard the first stirrings of the movers, the thud of an ax. From the opposite direction he heard the returning tread of Elder Proudy.

Galt got to his feet. He shook his head.

"It's no good," he said. "They'll hunt for him and find him."

"Yes," answered Elder Proudy, "of course they will. However, there are certain deceptions—" He coughed delicately. "I think," he said, "that when they do find him, they may lay the blame on the Indians. It's a possibility."

Galt experienced a faint chill. He was remembering the knife!

Elder Proudy picked up his rifle. Proudy, expert on the ways of silence, was now starting back to camp.

"Wait," said Galt. "You know why Fain tackled me?"

"I can guess. On account of my Mary." Proudy looked dreamily into the distance. "Unfortunately, Gentile, there are reasons—"

"No." interrupted Galt, "there are no reasons. And I'm tired of being 'Gentile.' And I'm tired of being unfortunate. I'm tired—" Anger leaped in Galt like a bright, thin sword. He planted himself directly before Proudy. "Shall I tell you, Elder Proudy," he asked, "all the things I'm tired of?"

Proudy stared bleakly at Galt. Then, briefly, his beady eyes showed a melancholy warmth.

"I don't think that's necessary," he replied gently. "I *know*, Lee. Perhaps I should speak of this to my daughter."

"We'll both speak to her," said Galt.

They went down the hill-slope, entered the camp.

Mary Proudy was on her knees before the Proudy tent, trying to build a fire. She glanced up. She remained kneeling there, a block of matches in one hand and a blazing tuft of whittlings in her other hand. Just so she had looked at Galt in that lamp-lit farmhouse in Illinois, her dark eyes widening, a flush running high in her cheeks. And how long ago? How do you measure the interval between now and then? By weariness? By emptiness? The miles traversed? The days of the calendar? By the timeless poignancy of memory? Just one little minute!

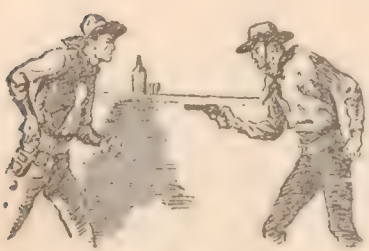
And the minute ticked on—

"Can you hear it, Elder Proudy?" Lee Galt was thinking. "Can you muffle it behind your wall of silence?"

There was a sigh from Elder Proudy, the quiet sigh of resignation.

"You are right, Lee," said the elder. "There are no reasons." Then Elder Prouty turned and walked away.

Cowboy Insurance



THE big Eastern insurance companies sent their agents into the West as early as 1872, in some instances. But they refused to write policies for cowpunchers. The companies maintained that the mortality among this group was about seven times as great as it was among other "hazardous" callings such as construction workers, seamen, professional hunters, and so forth. If cowboys weren't killed in local wars they got themselves hurt in town in barroom fights, or they were thrown from their horses, or they were horned by steers, or shot at by wild Indians.

The cattle owners fared just a little better. According to the insurance actuaries their position did put them in constant danger but their chances were about sixty per cent better than the chances of the men who rode herd for them. Even at that ranchers who were willing to pay four times the customary premium for their age group could get nothing larger than a $5000 policy from any one company.

—*Simpson M. Ritter*

Going West? Want a homestead? Here's your chance — at $2.50 to $10.00 per acre — in the Columbia Basin project!

by JOHN A. THOMPSON

NEW LAND for SETTLERS

"GOING! Going! GONE!" cries the auctioneer, and with the bang of his gavel some lucky Government land buyer has acquired wealth that is real and tangible. That swinging gavel will give emphasis to the tremendous new land opportunities Uncle Sam is just now readying for those who want to settle in the West. Today's version of homesteading is a planned out, long range proposition.

For this year, and the next thirty years at least, the vast irrigation projects undertaken by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in the Western States will afford land seekers a chance to settle in the West. It is a chance that is in many ways far better than anything the covered-wagon pioneers ever dreamed of.

The largest project now being completed in the program is in the sunkissed sagebrush lands of the Columbia Basin in south-central Washington in the Pacific Northwest. There, where summers are balmy and winters surprisingly mild, the Bureau of Reclama-

tion plans to irrigate more than a million acres of raw, new land.

The water for this huge farm land enterprise will come from the waters of the once raging Columbia river impounded behind Grand Coulee Dam. The entire project area—to give you an idea of the scope of the undertaking—is some 80 miles long, north and south, and 60 miles wide, east and west. It totals 2½ million acres.

Already a flood of applications from eager land seekers has been filed for the first farms made available in the first irrigation block to receive water—the Pasco Pumping unit, about 12 miles northwest of the city of Pasco. This block includes all told some 5,500 acres of irrigable land.

New Areas Almost Ready

That is just a start. The opening wedge, so to speak. Reclamation Bureau schedules at the time this is being written indicate construction of the main irrigation system in the northern part of the Columbia Basin project will be advanced sufficiently to make delivery of water to some of the land in that area possible within the next year or so.

At that time new land will be ready for irrigation in the vicinity of Stratford and Adrian under the main canal, Soap Lake and Quincy under the west canal, and Moses Lake and Wheeler under the east low canal. Moreover, Bureau officials expect that once the ball gets rolling blocks of 10,000 to 30,000 acres or more will be brought under irrigation yearly in *each* of the three principle irrigation districts in the project.

That is a brief—very brief—summary of the irrigation setup as far as the Columbia Basin is concerned. It is enough to make any hombre who desires new farm land in the West sit up and take notice. Moreover, it offers prospective settlers the chance of a lifetime to own their own irrigated farms on a deal that beats any radio quiz program four ways from the middle.

Now let's get down to cases and answer questions that are sure to crop up regarding this new land, and how it can be obtained at present or in the immediately coming years.

In the first place, unlike the raw land blocks embraced in many of the other western irrigation projects, there is comparatively little homesteadable public land in the Columbia Basin area. On the other hand, the Government has purchased, and has plans for the continuing purchase of large blocks—perhaps a half million acres all told—of irrigable land from private owners.

This land, together with such acreages as are homesteadable, is being broken up as rapidly as possible into family-size farm units. As irrigation water becomes available these units will be sold to qualified settlers on the rock-bottom basis of appraised dry land values. And brother, that's a bargain! $2.50 to $10.00 an acre for land worth ten times that much the minute water flows in—and even more once it has been developed and put into productive cultivation. Moreover, long term payments on the original purchase price will generally be allowed.

This raw land price decision is an anti-speculation feature that was specificaly included in the original Columbia Basin Project Act. It is designed to eliminate such practices as the recorded cases of raw land being sold for anywhere from 100% to more than 5000% above its true value that have occurred in the history of earlier western irrigated land booms.

The ruling has teeth in it. Under the provisions of the Columbia Basin Act, if land otherwise eligible to receive irrigation water is sold for more than the Government-appraised value, the right of that land to receive water can be canceled.

Land for Settlers

From the start Uncle Sam has determined that this new land, ready for development into rich farms, shall be awarded to bona-fide settlers and Western home-seekers. And kept out of the hands of speculators.

Though the soils within the irrigable area of the Columbia Basin Project vary widely they are well suited to irrigation farming because they are (1) free-working, and (2) do not contain harmful quantities of alkali. There are no sections of heavy, clay soil. The soil best suited for irrigation farming range from fine silt loams to loamy sands, and their depths vary from about 2 feet to more than 15 feet.

So the prospective settler will know what he is getting, and get what he pays for the irrigable land has been broken up into various classes—with each class having a definite price range.

Class I land has deep soil, not more than a 5% slope, is well suited to the production of row crops, potatoes, sugar beets, truck crops and hay and pasture. Its raw land price has been set at from $7.50 to $10.00 per acre.

Class II land, $5.00 to $7.00 an acre, may be rougher in contour with up to 10% slope and the soil shallower and slightly lighter in texture. It is well adapted to diversified farming but not as good, generally speaking, for intensive farming as Class I land.

Land in Class III, $2.50 to $4.50 per acre, while irrigable is of poorer soil grade and contour and usually best fitted for putting into hay and pasture.

Class VI land—and don't ask us what happened to classes IV and V. They just don't show in the tables—is not suitable for irrigation and too rough, steep, sandy or rocky to be considered adaptable to economical farm operation. It is priced at $1.00 to $2.00 an acre.

How large are the farms? The size varies and is determined by such factors as land type, topography, location and so forth. But in all cases each individual "farm unit" laid out by the Government in the different irrigation blocks will be large enough to sustain a single farm family, once the land has been developed and put into production. By farm family the Government means a husband and wife, together with their children under 18 years old.

A single family may own only one farm unit. That is with the exception of those who were land owners out there prior to May 27th, 1937, who may retain their holdings up to 160 acres of irrigable land.

Class I farm units generally susceptible to more intensive farming than units of the other land classes usually will be from 45 to 80 acres. Class II units run from 70 to 100 acres, and Class III units from 80 to 140 acres.

Veterans Rated First

In applying for and buying these farm units as they are made ready by the availability of irrigation water veterans of World War II are given a definite preference—provided they submit their applications within a specified period following the public announcement of the successive sales of Government-owned lands on the Columbia Basin Project.

Okay. Now how do you find out about these sale announcements? Easy. All it takes is a remembered address, a short note, and a three cent stamp.

Ready? Here's the address. Better copy it down *now*.

Any veteran of World War II interested in applying for the purchase of one of these new "farm unit" Government-owned land tracts in the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project should write—and the sooner the better—to the Bureau of Reclamation, Ephrata, Washington. In your letter simply state that you are a World War II veteran and request that your name be placed on the mailing list to receive notices when Government-owned lands on the Columbia Basin Project are offered for sale.

That's all. There is nothing complicated about it. The Bureau of Reclamation will do the rest. But don't forget to include in your letter both the name *and address* to which you want the notices sent.

Later, as the land opening program is stepped up, some of these Government-owned irrigated farm units will undoubtedly be made available to other settlers as well. That is to home-seekers who do not have World War II veteran's preference. In fact technically even now any land remaining in the various blocks after qualified veteran-preference applicants have been satisfied is open to other settlers.

But so far in actual practice the World War II vets have been proving themselves as much on the ball in peace time as they were at the fighting fronts. Judging from the army of applications the Bureau of Reclamation has received to date, they are not about to pass up a grateful Uncle Sam's proffered bargain in new western irrigated farm land real estate.

Even veteran-preference applications have been running consistently ahead of the number of farm units available.

Here is the general procedure being followed at present. No Government-owned land is being sold until just before the time water is ready to be run to the specific irrigation block in which

the land lies. By then the land in these blocks will already have been divided into a definite number of farm size units, each unit of a size suitable to support an average family at an adequate living level.

Then a public announcement will be made by the Secretary of the Interior. This announcement will give the number, description and basic raw land value of each farm unit, as well as the conditions and terms under which the land will be offered for sale.

After this formal public announcement—and only after it—application blanks for the farm units announced opened will be available from any of the following Government offices:

Bureau of Reclamation, Ephrata, Washington; Bureau of Reclamation, Coulee Dam, Washington; Regional Office of the Bureau of Reclamation, Boise, Idaho; or from the Commissioner, Bureau of Reclamation, Washington, D. C.

Applicants Must Pass Test

As soon as your application blank is received it should be studied carefully, filled out and promptly returned to the proper office. Then a board of examiners will review all the submitted applications, and select qualified purchasers on the basis of farm experience, character, industry, health and capital. Following this a public drawing will be held to select the successful applicants from the list of those who qualify.

These are purchased farms of course, purchased at raw land valuation from Government-owned land and should not be confused with actual homesteads. It is probable that a down payment of approximately 20% of the purchase price will be required at the time the land is awarded, with the balance payable over a period of years, at a reasonable rate of interest.

Thus aside from mere wishful wanting some amount of capital will be required both for the down payment and the actual development of the farm. Living quarters must also be considered. Temporary ones at first perhaps, but eventually a permanent farm home—and one that you and your family can be proud of in your new setting.

Cash outlay for all this varies widely of course both with the scale of living the new owner decides to set for himself, the cost of materials, and the amount of actual construction work the owner can do for himself. Even so it should be evident that these costs on the most economical basis will run into several thousands of dollars. Say from $5,000. to $7,000., or higher.

On the other hand, it is not likely that such a large amount would have to be cash on the barrel head. The entire outlay need not be made the minute the farm is settled. Indeed in many cases full development costs can and are likely to be spread over a period of perhaps 10 to 15 years following settlement. That makes the money problem a lot less burdensome.

What about credit? Credit is always primarily an individual problem. On these irrigated farm units, as elsewhere it is the settler's responsibility—and he should have at least enough cash to carry him and his family through the first year of the development period.

Aside from that settlers on other irrigation projects have solved the problem by obtaining credit from several divergent sources. The Farmers' Home Administration (FHA); Production Credit Associations; land banks; farm machinery dealers; relatives and so forth. In some cases "benefits" under the GI Bill of Rights have helped out.

Usually the veteran qualified applicant who wins one of these potentially rich irrigated farms, and has what it takes to make a go of it can swing the deal somehow or another.

At any rate there is one thing, and it is an important item too, settlers on these new Columbia Basin irrigated farm units won't have to worry about. And that is water. In planning the vast irrigation system with its enormous miles long network of main and subsidiary canals careful provision has been made for ample water on all lands classified as irrigable, and sold for irrigation farm purposes.

Water Charges Carefully Rated

Moreover, water charges will be prorated according to the repayment ability of the land.

Owners of the better lands will pay more, owners of the less productive lands pay less.

In addition Uncle Sam is going to do

all he can to give his new settlers a lift up. Plans are now being developed under which the Bureau of Reclamation, the Washington Extension Service, and possibly other agencies will cooperate in making plenty of technical assistance available to the newcomers. This includes engineering for the leveling of the land and for the individual farm irrigation system, planning field layouts and farmsteads, planning other farm buildings, advice on the selection and management of livestock and on crops and crop rotation, as well as on numerous other problems that are sure to beset the modern pioneer on an irrigated farm.

Now for some personal questions that are likely to need anwering? Roads and schools, for instance? Electric power? Water for domestic use? Job and business opportunities in the local towns and cities within the Columbia Basin Project's wide limits?

Let's tackle the items one at a time. Roads and schools? Most of the project is already served by a good system of primary highways. U.S. Highway 10 crosses the north-central section, U.S. 395 the southeasterly section and State Highway 7 the most northerly portion. Secondary and county roads criss-cross the already inhabited regions. New roads will undoubtedly be built as more and more succeeding land blocks are brought under irrigation.

Similarly though accredited schools are already available for the present population, it is fully expected and safe to assume that additional new ones will

Featured in the Next Issue

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be built as the actual need arises.

Electric power? Electricity was one of the primary reasons for the Grand Coulee Dam, and one of the principle products of the project. Present and potential power installations virtually assure an abundant supply of "juice" for farms in the Columbia Basin area.

To date water for domestic use has been an individual problem, solved as a rule by drilling wells. An adequate domestic water supply can generally be reached at depths of from 200 to 500 feet. However, as more farms are opened up the cost of a well for each farm unit could be burdensome. The Bureau of Reclamation is studying the problem at present with a view towards eventually establishing local community water systems that will serve whole groups of new settlers from a single drilled well—and substantialy reduce the domestic water cost to each farm unit.

As for jobs and business opportunities we can only give you two practical suggestions. They may help. General construction employment on the irrigation canals and so forth is handled directly by the contractors of such work, or through local offices of the various labor unions. All positions in the Bureau of Reclamation itself are filled from regular Civil Service lists established as a result of U.S. Civil Service examinations.

More Information Available

For further information anyone interested in employment with the Government on the Project should write to the Personnel Officer, Bureau of Reclamation, Coulee Dam, Washington.

Data on the subject of business opportunities in the towns within the Project area should be obtained by writing to the Chambers of Commerce in the principal towns and cities. Namely, Soap Lake and Ephrata in the northern part; Quincy in the northwest; Moses Lake, Othello and Warden in the central region; and Connell and Pasco in the southern portion. Remember too in this connection that as far as these irrigated Government-owned farm unit lands are concerned, the project is really just beginning. It will still be in the development stage for quite a few years to come. And the best opportunities for successful business will come *after* full settlement of the new farm region has actually taken place.

Even so it is not too early for those who want to get in on the ground floor to start making enquiries now.

That also applies to pioneer-minded Western land seekers who feel they would like to own, and are qualified to develop and operate, a highly productive irrigated farm unit in the vast new Columbia Basin irrigation project.

The going may be rough for a while. It is raw, uncultivated land as yet. Much of it sagebrush country that has never felt the bite of a plow. But it is essentially the same sort of American soil the first homesteaders trekking West plowed, and planted and built into the rich farm land empire that comprises such a sizable portion of our Western States today.

And since the new farm units will be on irrigated land the present pioneers to the Columbia Basin area, as well as their successors, will have the assurance of adequate water for the production of their crops. There will be no cycle of good crops and lean, no off-years to be struggled through because of insufficient rainfall in a marginal rainbelt country. For the worker each season should produce its own productive crop. This year, and the next, and the next.

Moreover, and this is one of the principle reasons why so much detail has been given in this article, it is not the Old West, or old style homesteading that has been discussed. These Government-owned, raw-land-priced farm unit tracts are strictly of the present, and the immediate future. In their own way they are as modern and as history making as jet propulsion, or atomic energy. They mark an entirely new concept in Western farm land settlement.

Like most new things it will take men, yes and wives too, with courage and vision to take advantage of the opportunity this farm land project offers. Perhaps they will be mostly of the younger generation. They must at least be young in heart and spirit.

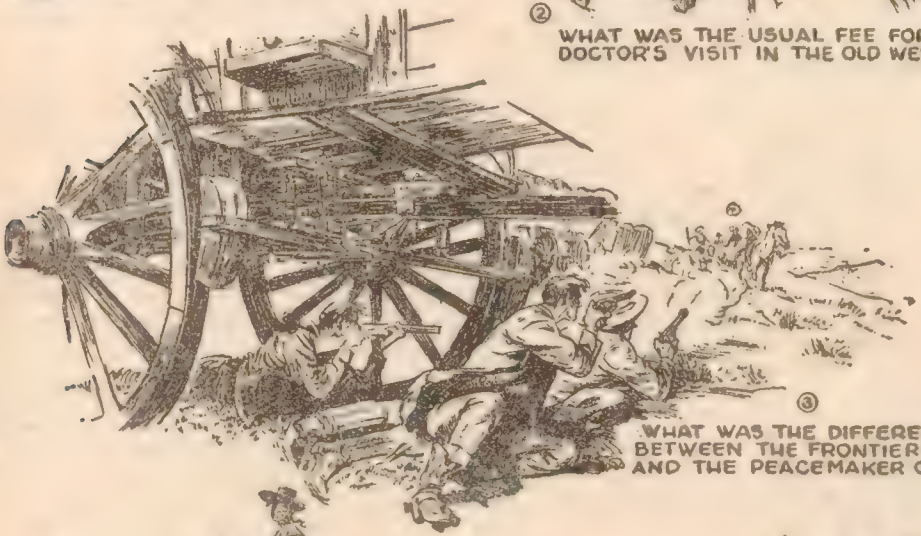
But they can plan *now*. Start to save, if necessary. And when the time comes they will be ready to claim and till their share of the Western farm lands that still remain our natural heritage.

And believe me, your own irrigated farm in the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project is well worth planning for.

COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

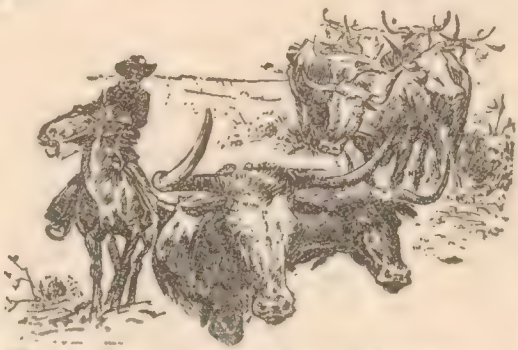
① WHO KILLED PAT GARRET ?

② WHAT WAS THE USUAL FEE FOR A DOCTOR'S VISIT IN THE OLD WEST?



③ WHAT WAS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE FRONTIER COLT AND THE PEACEMAKER COLT?

④ WHY DID SOME PUNCHERS CARRY A HORSESHOE IN THEIR SLICKER ROLLS ?

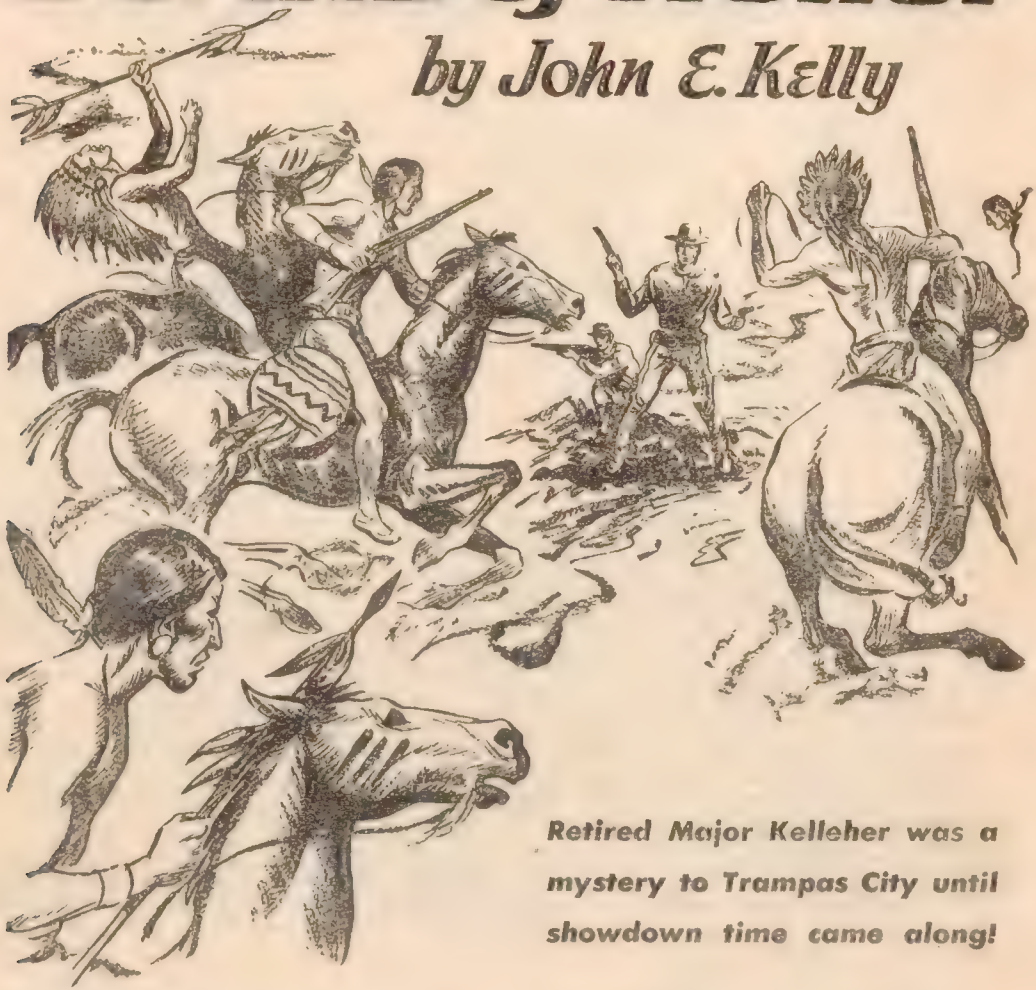


⑤ WHY WERE STEERS EAR-MARKED AS WELL AS BRANDED ?

The answers are on Page 153—if you MUST look!

GUARD of Honor

by John E. Kelly



Retired Major Kelleher was a mystery to Trampas City until showdown time came along!

KELLEHER'S writin' his alibi."

"Drygulch Dugan" smiled when he said that. It was a reg'lar he-man smile, friendly—and skin deep.

Strangers cottoned to our county attorney on sight. It took quite a spell to learn that everything Dugan said was aimed at pizening somebody's reputation. That's how he got the monicker "Drygulch." You'll mebbe understand how come Trampas City followed his lead on the Major when we knew Dugan was a sidewinder in pants, if I tell you that in the old days here it was dang nigh open season on flatland furriners.

Trampas is frontier yet, like there's hardly any left. There's no railroad in the county and does anyone need to call outside, the baling-wire line from Trampas City over the mountains to Masonton works from breakfast to dark, 'cepting holidays and times when Miss Kitty Ramspaugh, the operator, is feeling puny.. There's days when Miss Kitty don't take in six bits.

The first prospectors came in '51, spreading out from Marshall's gold strike over on the American River, and somehow Trampas never changed much. Mebbe that's why it's such good copy for the tenderfoot book wranglers. They claim we got "atmosphere". The boys

figured that was a fighting word until Professor Duggle, the school committeeman, looked it up in his book.

The story-writing dudes pack notebooks. Summers now, they mosey over to Skyfork where "Jet" La Framboise runs her artists' colony—the more artist the less clothes it seems like, and how them city gals stand to ride barelegged through the mesquite beats me!—or pump the cowboys and barflies in the Gold Palace Hotel.

They print pieces about Dugan, his stooge Sheriff "Banty" Matthews and the dumb deputy, Curt Ellison. They go strong for the beautiful Widow Wolf—she was county clerk the time I'm telling about. There ain't been so much peddled about Major Kelleher, 'cause the old-timers still hate to admit they didn't savvy him first off.

The Major was different to any we knew. In those days everybody in Trampas was a mine or cattleman, barring a fistful of 'fishuls, traders, Ma San, the laundryman, Doc Fox the sawbones, and one lawyer—the aforesaid Dugan—in the county seat.

A MAN who didn't work was suspicioned, and rightly, most times, of hiding out. Specially when he didn't mix. Kelleher was polite, sure, and would stop at a hail, but there's ways of killing conversation just by answering "yes" or "no" to everything.

"An educated feller like the Major," Lem Stoddard the postmaster said, yarning with my dad, "must have folks somewheres. But he never mails a letter."

My dad loved to argufy and he come back at Lem, taking up for the Major.

"Most of Trampas never does either," he said.

"But they can't write," said Lem.

Folks who used to drop up to Kelleher's cabin, sociable-like, when he first came out and before the story got around about him, would find him writing, with a stack of filled sheets at his elbow. Our town didn't hold much with book l'arning, so naturally we was curious what the Major was up to. Dugan got in his licks like I said.

Not that the Major ever used his sojer handle. Nor "Mister" even. When he had to meet up with somebody new, he'd put out a lean hand and bark "Kelleher" in a way that dropped the subject right off. But when we got to know who he was, it stuck out all over him. Those shoulders and that backbone had been to West Point.

He had the build of a cavalryman and a walk, even in store-bought clothes and flat-heeled shoes—Trampas never saw him in anything else until that last day—that showed him born to the saddle as much as any cowboy out of the Bald Hills straddling high, wide and handsome in the Gold Palace bar.

It was the sergeant who told us Kelleher was a major—and didn't tell much else. When the thin stranger got off the Masonton stage one summer day, another trailed him, walking three steps behind, carrying the Major's grip and his own. Me and Dad were taking it easy in the shade of Doc Moyne's drug store, next to the stage office. Dad was a great one for troopers, having sojered some himself in '61. I saw him stiffen as he spotted the husky second man.

"'Member how I used to show yuh, Bub," Dad whispered to me. "Nobody but old-time cavalry sergeant-majors tip their heads back and wear their hat brims on their noses, thataway."

Kelleher looked around. There wasn't much to see then and hardly more now, with Main Street only a block long. But he sighed like he'd found what he'd come a far piece to find, and pushed into the drug store.

An hour later he had rented Doc's two-room cabin up on the mountain, sight unseen. It was empty, 'cause folks didn't care about living next door to Hell's Half Acre, which was jam packed with permanent settlers, two from spinal meningitis, the rest from a difference of opinion, or you might say lead pizening.

Doc Moyne was poetical, as the feller says, and he named his cabin Eagle's Nest. It looked down on Main Street and way out the Masonton Pike clear to Buckhorn Mountain. Behind, the peak towered up straight and cut off the north wind. To the right and not far below, the Beaver Creek flats stretched across to a spur of the mountain that ran down to the Lampa River, with the downcountry wagon trail angling across the flats, fixing to cross the ridge.

The Major went up to Eagle's Nest that afternoon and what I mean, stayed there. Once a week the big sergeant—Boyle he was—came down to buy their

grub. "The Major wants this." "The Major will take that."

Boyle wasted no time and paid cash. When Matt Ryan at the hardware store or Jess Wilkins, the grocer, tried to pump him, the sergeant's china-blue eyes went hard and he lost his hearing. Soon as he had checked off his list and filled the saddlebags he carried dangling from one outsize hand, we'd see him striding out of town, heading for the foot trail that led only to the cabin and the graveyard. Footing it, in a country where any white man with twenty dollars had him a hoss, no matter how sorry a crowbait!

All this made plenty talk and there was more when we heard about Ma San. The Chinee was as uppity in his way as Drygulch Dugan hisself. He had no competition and less'n you sent your shirts to Masonton by stage, or scrubbed 'em in Beaver Crick, you toted your bundle to Ma San's hole in the wall.

BUT after Kelleher came, every two weeks the Chinese put his irons, starch and soap in a basket, curled his pigtail tight inside his pillbox nankeen cap, locked his door, and pattered up the trail to do the Major's washing. Dugan tried to follow suit, ordering Ma San to come to his house. Ma San was touchy as a teased snake. He burst into a screaming rage and chased Drygulch into the street, waving a hot poker.

"Majah mandarin fella!" Ma San jabbered. "You bling shirtee or stay dirtee allee time!"

Kelleher wrote no letters, but he got mail. Every three months, on the dot, Lem Stoddard would flag the sergeant on his shopping trip and send up notice of a registered letter. The next day the Major came down to sign for it.

"There's never nothin' inside but a check," the postmaster told his pards. "The envelope says some insurance comp'ny back in Philadelphy. I figger Kelleher's got one of them annuities."

But to a bunch of the boys, more than a mite riled by the Major's standoffishness, it was proof plain that Kelleher was a remittance man. Their story stuck, but with him hardly speaking to anybody, the Major didn't hear it for quite a spell.

Soon as he'd get his check, Kelleher would hightail down to the Gold Palace where Paddy Owens, on the sober side of the bar, cashed it for him. It was always the same, two hundred sixty-three dollars.

The Major would buy two quarts of the best rye, take his change in double eagles, leaving the three silver cartwheels for the bartender. Then Kelleher would swing on his heel and march out, bound straight for Eagle's Nest. Owens would round the bar on the double to hold the door for him.

"A rale gintleman!" Paddy would repeat, watching the Major up the street. "A rale gintleman!"

Eighty dollars cash every month was bonanza in those days and Drygulch Dugan itched for a slice. He sent for the Major, pretending like it was 'fishul business, and ran through all his phony tricks, offering to cut Kelleher in on deals, for so much cash down.

No dice. The Major sat watching him with cold brown eyes, his mouth thin and flat. He had seen tinhorns before and wanted none of Dugan's sure-thing, easy-money schemes. After that, Kelleher ignored Drygulch.

But the county attorney wasn't giving in so easy, with cash in sight. He knew how folks talked about the Major. Dugan had a nose like a coon hound for family skeletons, and was drawing hush money from a dozen leading citizens right then. He wrote East on his 'fishul stationery and pretty soon the War Department answered.

The straight of it was, the Major had lost his command in the badlands. With only one troop, he had charged a hostile warhead, Blackfeet or Sioux. The cavalry had been wiped out and the only survivors, Kelleher and Boyle, left for dead. The Injuns had been mauled so bad they pulled out without scalping the whites.

By regulations the Army had to court-martial Kelleher and he was censured for rashness. The Major, who was in court on a stretcher, got so mad that he sat up, cussed out the judges, resigned his commission and fainted. But we didn't know that. Dugan let on Kelleher was cashiered for cowardice and them that wanted to, believed it. It seemed likely, considering what happened next.

The newspapers on the outside considers us peckerwoods and ringtailed galoots, but they ain't above cutting themselves in on any credit that comes Trampas' way. Me and Dad was at the stage

depot when Sim Bowman, the express messenger, threw down the Masonton *Weekly Nugget* that he had wadded in his shotgun scabbard.

"Hi, Dave!" his voice floated down from the boot, gritty with the dust of Buckhorn Mountain. "Look what one of our boys done!"

The editor's biggest type spread across the top of the sheet:

DEWEY TAKES MANILA!

But the very next size was under a picture of "Chuck" Gibbs, right from Main Street here, and it yelled:

HEROIC NEIGHBORHOOD YOUTH, SIGNALMAN ON FLAGSHIP, MENTIONED IN DESPATCHES

"Neighborhood!" snorted my dad. "It's nigh sixty mile to Masonton. Takin' in too much territory like that is what starts gunfights, and wars!"

WELL, naturally, Trampas puffed up like a pizened pup with pride and wanted to do something for "Chuck" to show he's appreciated. They took up a collection and it was Dugan, always wanting to get in on the limelight, that passed the hat. This day the Major was in town cashing his check and leaving the Gold Palace he met Drygulch, with half the town at his back. Kelleher had heard the news and he took a gold piece from his pocket and held it out to Dugan.

"I am happy to contribute to the fund," he said in his quiet voice.

Drygulch had been stewing in his juice ever since Kelleher turned him down and he wasn't one to miss such a chance. He snatched the hat away.

"This fund's for a hero!" he yelled so you could hear him all over town. "I'd as lief take a counterfeiter's money as a coward's!" And he patted himself quick under the arm to make sure his hideout gun's handy.

There was only one answer to that—hot lead. But Kelleher just stood there, looking Drygulch in the eye until the county attorney broke off the staring match. The Major dropped the coin in his pocket, slow like it was a signal or something. His tight Eastern coat showed plain that he packed no gun.

I can see now he was figuring he had been through too much to bother fighting an ornery horntoad like Dugan. But that ain't Trampas style. When Kelleher pushed past Drygulch without speaking, the crowd opened up for him and two-three of the boys spit in his path.

That did it. The Major was tagged public as a coward and Trampas wanted no truck with him. When he came to the Gold Palace with his next check, Paddy Owens cashed it unsmiling and pushed back the three silver dollars. Kelleher flushed, looked like he was going to speak, then turned and closed the door quiet behind him.

After that, he got his money at the post-office where Lem Stoddard was glad to have a check for his money transfers and didn't give a hoot what Trampas thought. Sergeant Boyle bought the rye, two guns tied low on his hips and a look on his Irish face daring anybody to make something of it. Nobody did.

Mention '98 to most folks and they think of the Rough Riders and Admiral Dewey. But to old-timers in these parts, that was the year of the Morfin War. It began innocuous, as Professor Duggle said, but we came near getting what happens to innocent bystanders.

In the small creeks around Trampas City the gold lay in shallow gravel. The lone-wolf sourdoughs and prospecting partners made a good living and there was plenty dust and nuggets passing over the bars in the Gold Palace and McGulvery's deadfall. But at the lower end of the county, where the Lampa runs deep in canyons, wing dams were needed to push the river aside while the sandbars were worked.

Each prospector wanted to boss the job and every try ended in a free-for-all. Then the Chinese came up from the Coast in tongs and hundreds and stripped the channel bare. Some of the boys got their bristles up at so much gold going to the heathen. Ed Morfin made himself their leader.

Morfin was a bucko mate, in sail around the Horn, who drifted ashore and up into the back country. In Trampas he'd failed at ranching and prospecting when he hit upon the easy money of "minin' Chinese for their gold."

It was duck soup to sneak up along the canyon rim at sunset, spot them around their supper fires at the water's edge and spray 'em with slugs and buckshot until they stopped wiggling. The

Morfin gang took in plenty gold but too much territory. They forgot it's a heap easier to start trouble than stop it.

That's Injun country downriver. The Picaros are right strong yet, though most of 'em live on the Reservation now. The Chinese had no women and some of them bought young squaws. The Morfin gang killed the squaws along with the men and the tribe got real hostile. They went on the warpath with a whoop, cornered the gang in a box canyon where they teased 'em into shooting off all their ammunition. Then the Injuns drowned the gang in the Lampa, scalped, their mouths stuffed with gold.

NOBODY'D beef over the Morfin gang taking the big jump, but the Picaros didn't call their shots. They set out to wipe out all the whites in the county. Ranches were burned down around Tyler's Ford and the first thing we knew, the whole kit and kaboodle of braves were heading for the county seat —and not to vote.

Sheriff Banty Matthews deputized every man in town, 'cepting only old Matt Ryan—young Matt he was then—who was just getting over blood pizening and too weak to ride. I cut up quite a ruckus when Banty wouldn't take me and my pony. He claimed I was too young. Shucks, my dad was a drummer at Shiloh when he was twelve, and here I was rising eleven and big for my age.

It goes to show what the county thought of Kelleher, that nobody mentioned taking him. And even Curt Ellison wasn't dumb enough to try to deputize Boyle without the Major.

I will say for Banty that the prideful little squirt—the only man I ever saw who could strut sitting down—lost no time. An hour after we got the news, the boys were falling in up at the County Building. The sheriff was counting noses when Dugan rode up on his chestnut mare.

Drygulch had a poor seat and the mare was skittish from lack of exercise, so the crowd gave her plenty of heel room. Dugan motioned Matthews to one side, near where I was standing with the other town kids, rubbering and still begging to go along.

"Banty," began Dugan low, like he didn't want to be overheard, "it ain't safe to leave the town unguarded. We ought to send to Masonton for help."

The sheriff picked that one up fast. "Good idee," he answered. "I'll send the Widow Wolf. Her palomino's the fastest-gaited hoss in Trampas."

Dugan's pretty-boy face clouded like he ain't pleased.

"Belle's needed here to head up the women, if anything goes wrong," he objected, and there was sense in what he claimed.

Banty's eyes fell on me, where I was pushing forward to make him notice.

"This kid's beggin' to help," he said. "He could take a note to the marshal."

Drygulch gave me a dirty look. "The ground squirrels'd get the little runt," he snapped, nasty. "I'll go, and catch up with yuh before yuh meet the Picaros."

Matthews owed his job to Dugan, but for once he was thinking of Trampas. He shook his head and set that little box-trap jaw.

"I can't spare yuh, Dan," he barked. "I'm needin' every man-jack."

Dugan cut in quick. "As county attorney it's my duty to seek help. I'm yore superior. You can't deputize me."

Before Banty could answer, Drygulch rode down the street, out on the Masonton Pike. He got an extra quick start, 'cause I kicked his mare and she nigh unseated him.

There was considerable jawing among the boys about Dugan running out, but Banty cut it short and headed 'em out downriver on the wagon trail. The women folks had more to say when Drygulch wasn't back at nightfall—or sunup either.

But right after that we forgot him, for the sun wasn't an hour over Buckhorn Mountain when there's a patch of dust out west and here came a half-grown gal, Betsy Lane, hell-to-leather on her pony. Only there wasn't no leather.

The Picaros were attacking the settlement at Lane's, scarce ten miles down river, and Betsy, out milking, got to her pinto in the pasture and away bareback. That meant the Injuns had outfoxed Banty and had a clear road to Trampas with nothing to stop 'em.

You ain't never heard the like for yelling and carrying on, but Matt Ryan and Belle Wolfe finally got all the families corraled in the County Buiding, where they figured to hold out until Banty got back. Nobody put much stock in Dugan bringing help from Masonton.

I begged Ma to let me ride and warn the men, but she grabbed my ear and I had a tough time getting loose long enough to hook Dad's spyglass from over the mantel. Whilst we were going up the street, lugging vittles and bedding, and Grandpa's picture—he was the first territorial Governor and ma set a heap of store by it—Ma San ran past, with a wicker basket on his head.

He passed the County Building, hotfooting it toward the graveyard trail. Going to hide out in the brush, I figured, with his basket full of rice, less'n the Picaros'd scalp him for his pigtail.

The County Building was the same as now, a two-story white box, only the stucco was cleaner. There's stairs up through the middle and I got away from Ma and up on the flat roof. It was swell up there, and I was trying the spyglass on buzzards circling over the mountain, which I could see just as plain, when all of a sudden the spur ridge where the wagon trail climbed over was topped by a dark streak with feathers showing white.

I got a good sight through the telescope and went cold inside, for there must have been a hundred Injuns, in warbonnets and war paint, sitting their ponies, spying out the lay of the land. I yelled and the Widow Wolf came up with her sporting Winchester. I felt some better 'cause Belle could nick a silver dollar every time at a hundred paces, and I figured she'd get a passel of the varmints soon as they got within range.

THE Picaros had stopped there, thinking, I reckon. Wondering how many whites were in town. They couldn't surround Trampas City like a lone cabin and had to figure out how to do it.

My arm got kind of tired holding the long spyglass and I set it down to rest a minute. Just then I caught a flash of blue where the graveyard slope levels out on the Beaver Creek flats. I snatched up the 'scope again and my eyes bugged out at what I saw.

The whole of the flats had been worked for gold and the gravel was lying there mother-naked, without no trees or bushes growing on it. Stepping out into the open, like he was on parade, came Major Kelleher. His full-dress blues were pressed like new, the gold stripe on his cavalry britches was plain in my glass and his spurs twinkled in the sun. But he had no hoss.

On each hip he had a big holster, the flaps hanging free, and the butt of a Frontier model peeping out. Three paces to the rear marched Sergeant Boyle carrying a Spencer carbine, old regulation, at the ready.

I was too excited to talk, but nudged the Widow Wolf and handed her the glass. She looked and her words were scornful. Belle had liked the Major at first—Dugan 'lowed she set her cap for him—but she turned against him like everybody else.

"Fools!" the Widow sniffed, though ladylike. "Do they think the Injuns'll wait? If they had any sense they'd be running here down the graveyard trail, 'stead of taking that roundabout by the flats. And dressing up to impress the women!"

I grabbed the telescope from her, rude, but she made me mad. Even a little kid knew sojers fight in uniform. I'd been figuring some on marrying Belle when I grew up, but now I changed my mind and was right pleased I hadn't asked her to wait for me.

I was polishing the lens with Dad's bandanna which I had brought along, when I heard the Widow gasp. There's a low wall around the edge of the roof and Belle was leaning over, shading her eyes with her hand.

"Oh, no!" she cried like those two could hear her. "Oh, no, you can't! Come back!"

I near put my eye out, jamming the 'scope into place. The Major and Boyle had reached the wagon trail. Pivoting on their heels, like a lodge drill team, they swung into the near rut, where the gravel was smooth from the wide tires of ox carts. I'd figured they'd make better time on the road and reach us pronto, but they turned their backs on town and marched steadily up grade! Straight up the trail to where the Picaros waited with their muskets and scalping knives ready.

The Widow's yell brought Matt Ryan and then all the families, up on the roof. I expected a sight of jabbering, but they seemed struck dumb, watching. Frontier folks knew what chance the two troopers had, afoot among all those hostiles. And they saw, now, what the Major was up to, keeping the Picaros from town until Banty could get back.

Belle put her hand to her mouth and

bit her fingers to keep from crying, and I'm admitting I wasn't far behind. Some of the women were praying, and more and more weeping. It was pitiful, but more than that, they were all deep ashamed, for there wasn't one on that roof who hadn't called Kelleher a coward.

I'll never know how long it took the Major to cross the flats. He didn't hurry, but he didn't stop, even when he got down to no more than four fingers high in my glass. The Picaros sat their hosses, biding their time, knowing the whites couldn't get away.

Injuns have respect for nerve, and they're plumb scared of crazy men. Mebbe they thought Kelleher loco, or playing a trick. Anyway, when he got to the edge of the gravel, under the ridge, the three Picaro chiefs rode down to powwow with him. Their warbonnets filled my telescope with feathers and they milled about, getting between the Major and me.

Suddenly I heard the Major's pistols, faint with distance like pea pods popping, then the *crump* of the Spencer. The tribe swept off the ridge and there was nothing but a whirlpool of redmen and hosses, with war clubs waving and spears stabbing, where Kelleher and Boyle had stood. I knew what that meant and I burst out bawling and dropped the telescope.

WHEN I got the spyglass working again, the ridge top was boiling, but nary a feather showed. It was the Trampasans, late but not too late, doubling back on the Picaros' trail. Banty's boys got off that spur so fast it looked like they jumped down the slope and landed plumb on the hostiles.

There was the devil to pay then, sure enough, but the dust blinded my sight. When it cleared a mite, there were some Injun ponies running around looking for new riders, and what was left of the tribe you could put in a basket. Only nobody bothered. Somebody sighted blue under the pile where the dead were thickest, and that ain't an Injun color.

The boys were tossing dead Picaros off'n that heap like they were cordwood. The three chiefs were there, drilled between the eyes, two with pistol lead, the other with his scalp-lock hanging loose where the carbine slug came out. The Major and Boyle were blood from head to foot and it would be easier to tell you where they wasn't slashed and slugged.

Doc Fox gave both up for goners, but Paddy Owens threw himself on his knees beside Kelleher and claimed he felt a pulse. The barkeep was built like a blacksmith and he picked the Major up in his arms, gentle like he was a sleeping child, and carried him all the way to town. All the way, I tell you, and giving himself the rough side of his tongue as he came.

"Paddy Owens, dirty spalpeen that ye be!" he cried, "insultin' the foine gintleman when he came to cash his bit check, and him this day savin' yer wife and childer from the bloody savages!"

The rest of the boys were tongue-tied but they showed their feelings plain. Leading their hosses, they followed Paddy afoot, right up to the door of Widow Marlin's boarding house, where Doc Fox fixed up the front room for a hospital, and hung around for hours until Banty had to order them away.

The news must have got outside fast, for three days after the battle, while Doc Fox was worrying about gangrene, there was a cloud of dust and a tattoo of hoofs down at the lower end of Main Street, where Beaver Creek crosses. I ran out of the drug store, leaving the ice-cream Doc Moyne had given me for washing his windows, and here came a half troop of cavalry, in the blue shirts and khaki britches and leggins they wore then, riding in close order about an Army ambulance.

They drew up at the Widow Marlin's and a medical captain, very stiff and starched, got down from the ambulance and stalked into the boarding house. He handed Doc Fox some papers and saved him the trouble of reading 'em.

"My orders are to return Major Kelleher and Sergeant Boyle to the Post Hospital at Fort Lyndale," he announced curt, "where they can have adequate care." He looked cold at the Widow's best beds and bedding and then at Trampas crowding in behind him. "And privacy," he added.

Major Kelleher opened his eyes and shook his head slow. Boyle was making heavy weather, and didn't seem to hear. Doc Fox studied the medico for a long minute and when he spoke, it was for all of us.

"I should be grateful for your cooperation, Doctor," he said, and his tone was

calm and even, "in treating our townsmen here." He bore down heavy on the last word.

The captain hardly gave him time to finish. He motioned the medical corpsmen to bring their litters.

"My orders will be carried out forthwith," he snapped. "The Army always takes care of its own."

Matt Ryan was black-haired, like all the Ryans, but he had a red-headed temper. He wasn't taking any more down-the-country from the tenderfoot in uniform. He stepped up beside Doc Fox and faced the officer.

"What's the Army horning in for?" he demanded. "The Major wasn't good enough for you before this. You dropped him for cowardice."

"Cowardice?" yelled the medico, forgetting the patients.

He balled up his fists and took a step toward Ryan. Then he got a grip on himself and stopped, pointing through the window to where the troopers were lined up in a double row, facing the entrance.

"That's a guard of honor," he said quiet, and there was pride in his voice, "for a man who never counted odds!"

The Major's picture—in his cavalry blues—is up at the County Building, hanging alongside of Signalman Gibbs'. Jet La Framboise's old man painted it, and he was the best on the Coast. The whole county chipped in to pay the bill; everybody except Drygulch Dugan. The boys wouldn't take his money.

Answers to Questions on Page 145

1. Historians disagree as to whether it was Jim Miller, The Thousand Dollar Killer, who bushwhacked him on the road outside LasCruses, or Wayne Brazell. Brazell actually confessed to the crime, was tried and gotten off by his lawyer, Judge Albert B. Fall (of later Teapot Dome fame) but was finally lynched by vigilantes.

2. Fifty cents, cash or its equivalent in produce.

3. The Peacemaker was .45 calibre and the Frontier .44 calibre. The Frontier was most widely used because its bullets also fit the popular Winchester carbine.

4. Not for good luck, but to use as a running iron, if they were inclined to larceny. If caught with a recognizable running iron it was usually a hanging matter, but a horseshoe could be alibied away as a spare for the bronc.

5. So that cowboys could identify the critter even when the brand was not visible, such as when the cows were close-packed in a herd.

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THE GOODNIGHT TRAIL

By TEX MUMFORD

The Saga of Charles Goodnight, Cattle Drive Pioneer!

THE popular idea of the great cattle drive trails was that they all headed north out of Texas to the railroad in Kansas. But this was not so. The Goodnight trail, one of the first, headed not north to Kansas, but west to New Mexico. There was as yet no market in Kansas.

Charles Goodnight, a giant of the cattle raising business, was a Texan without honor in his own country. He was a big man, physically as well as other ways, six feet tall and weighing 225 pounds. He wore a short clipped beard and this item served to remind his southern neighbors unpleasantly of General Ulysses S. Grant and the fact that Goodnight had fought with the Union forces during the war instead of with the Confederates.

Under such conditions, the Rebs felt that it was a virtue to steal Goodnight's cattle, for it was not dishonorable to steal from an enemy, such as he had clearly shown himself. Being stripped, Goodnight looked about him for some way of saving his possessions.

Word came to him that the government was begging for beef at Fort Sumner in New Mexico to feed the Navajos. Goodnight rounded up his cattle and started out with his partner, Oliver Loving, on the dangerous Horseshoe Trail across the Staked Plains. It was a parched route, with little water and lots of Comanches.

To feed his men, Goodnight invented and built the first chuck wagon, a monster which required ten oxen to haul it.

Luck was with them. They met no Indians on the trip and had to fight only dust, heat, insects and thirst. But they got to Fort Sumner and sold the beef for eight cents a pound on the hoof.

The culls which were rejected by the army were a problem, but Loving gathered them and drove them on over Raton Pass into the Colorado foothills, where the miners in Denver snapped them up.

While he was doing this, Goodnight was riding back to Texas for another herd and bringing with him a pack train of government gold. At one point the mules stampeded and Goodnight saw his money vanishing. He rode like a demon to round them up and managed to catch every one.

Their luck ran out on the next drive, which was in 1867. They were hit by Comanches, who drove off 1300 head of cows. Loving and Wilson, a one-armed cowboy, were ambushed by Indians. Loving was shot twice, both horses killed.

Wilson concealed Loving in the cane brakes along the Pecos and floated downstream past the searching Comanches, then walked a hundred miles to the trail herd to get help.

Goodnight set out to find him at once, but Loving was not where Wilson had left him. Wounded, often delirious, without food, he made his way through the Comanche warriors and struck a trail where he was found by Mexicans who took him to Fort Sumner. By the time Goodnight arrived, he was better, but contracted food poisoning and died just when he was recovering from his wounds.

Goodnight went on alone to blaze new trails into the Rockies.

THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 6)

an enterprise born and engineered to only one purpose—to break a man named Matt Roberts.

There was a definite place to start, too. In the mining town of Carolina, the richest square mile on earth, there were 40,000 miners, all digging gold. But Carolina was a dry camp, without water. Water had to be brought by ditch from the river five miles away. And one man controlled that water—Matt Roberts. The richer the claims at Carolina got, the more Roberts charged for water.

The Fight Begins

"We'll build our own ditch," Morehouse said.

"And what'll Roberts do?"

"Turn the world upside down to stop us. Recruit a gang of gun-slingers to fight us every inch of the way."

"And if the toughs couldn't stop us, would he come himself?"

"Would he? That ditch is worth millions to him.

"Good," said Gale. "We'll build a ditch."

And that, *amigos,* is how the fight began. You'll go a long way before you find a tighter job than this novel, DRY CAMP, with more suspense and action and tension. The team of Lynch and Ballard work together like a team of ropers to give you smooth timing and exciting results. It's a fine yarn!

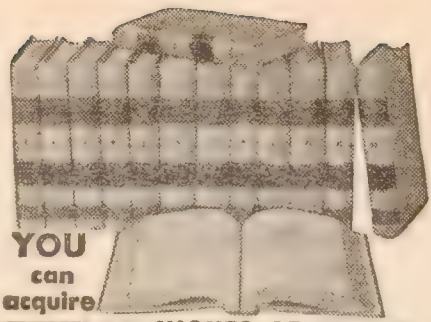
A Man Alone

We had to do a lot of hunting to find a novelet good enough to pair with DRY CAMP, but we found one by Wilbur S. Peacock that's a humdinger. This is called THE AFFAIR AT STINKING WELL and it tells the story of Tom Longbow, an Indian scout who was a man alone.

He was one-fourth white so he was neither white nor red, neither American nor foreigner, neither of the army nor of the Indians. When the troopers drank he did not, for as an Indian he was not permitted liquor. And when the Indians held ceremony and danced, he sat looking on, for he was a breed and his white blood made him stranger to the Indians.

But Tom Longbow could track. And he

[*Turn page*]



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had a sense of honor that his superior white officers might have learned from, if they had ever stopped being superior. And so, when the time came to weigh life itself in the balance against a man's honor, Tom Longbow showed himself every inch a man.

This is a novelet that will stay with you long after you've read it. Your old Ramrod is mighty proud to come up with a story as good as this one. And we'll be plumb glad to hear your opinion of it when you've read it.

Other Top-Flight Yarns

All you rannies must remember Charles Alden Seltzer, one of the grand old men of western fiction. Seltzer's books were household standbys in the old days. I reckon his TWO-GUN MAN was one of the first westerns I read. Well, we've found a Seltzer story that had never been published before and we've brought it to you. It's called SEVEN-UP'S CHRISTMAS and it's the story of two men snowed into a dugout on the northern ranges and what happened to them. When you read this little story you'll know why Charles Alden Seltzer held such a spell over his readers for all these years.

There's also another in Frederick R. Bechdolt's wonderful historical stories and this one is called THE LAST OF THE OPEN RANGES. It tells some stories of the Old West outlaws you might have missed—like the story of Mike Burnett, a nice boy who went wrong, and the story of Nate Champion, who fought like a lion until shot to rags by a posse in the climax of the bloody Johnson County War. These articles will give you a clearer picture of all the events on the huge stage of the West. I hope you're keeping them.

And we've just about time enough to mention the latest Boo-Boo Bounce story, EXPLOSIVE AND NO MISTAKE, by Ben Frank. The corpulent sheriff turns scientist in this new, hilarious yarn. He is dissatisfied with the brand of gunpowder being manufactured and decides to make his own, from a recipe handed down by his grandfather.

The results are just about what you'd expect, with Boo-Boo. His entanglement with a patent medicine man's bear doesn't help matters any for Boo-Boo, either, but his misfortunes are none of your own, as the song goes, and we're afraid that the worse

(Continued on page 159)

THE SPOILERS

An Era of Wasteful Slaughter on the Plains!

By WILLIAM CARTER

THERE is no parallel in history for the colossal, wasteful slaughter of the natural resources of the West.

Amateurs were bad enough. In 1855, Sir George Gore, an Irish peer, came to the Rocky Mountains with a retinue of 40 servants, 20 dogs, six wagons and 21 carts into which were loaded an arsenal of guns and fishing rods. A crew of choppers was recruited to cut roads for the wagons so that the company could penetrate the wilderness in comfort. Old Jim Bridger was hired to guide the party.

Gore's outfit killed 40 grizzlies, 3000 buffalo and so many elk, deer and antelope that they lost count.

But this was a drop in the bucket compared to the professional killers. Brick Bond, a buffalo hunter, is reported to have killed 6000 buffalo in 60 days. The hides brought $1.75 to $3.00—the rest of the animal was left to rot where it lay. A few of the humps and tongues were cured and shipped east in barrels, but not many.

For years, hunting parties, carrying lead in bricks which were melted down in frying pans and molded into bullets, covered the plains like a scourge. In 1874, homesteaders in Colorado collected a pile of buffalo bones 12 feet high by 12 feet wide by half a mile long, which were shipped to a fertilizer plant.

It was this colossal slaughter that broke the power of the Indian. The plains were swept bare of game and the Indian was reduced from a self-sufficient warrior to a beggar.

NEXT ISSUE

●

EXPLOSIVE AND NO MISTAKE

A Boo Boo Bounce Story

By BEN FRANK

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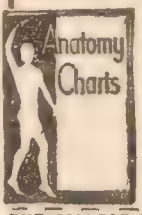

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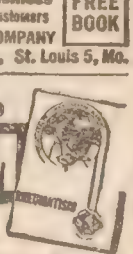

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The Wolfer

A Professional Who Protected Calves and Lambs

By BUCK BENSON

AN important job on many ranches was that of keeping down the wolf and coyote population which made heavy inroads into calves and lambs. If there were not too many wolves or coyotes in the section, one of the regular cowboys might occasionally take time off to do some trapping or poisoning. But if there were too many, or a very clever old wolf defied the usual attempts to get him, a professional "wolfer" might be hired.

This man had a natural knack for his job, whether he used traps, strychnine, or dogs to run the wolves down. Wolf hunts with packs of dogs were sometimes made into festive occasions, like the English fox hunts.

But mostly the wolfer worked alone, as solitary as his quarry. He might strew poisoned chunks of meat, loaded with deadly strychnine crystals, or set traps around a tempting dead cow, or find a critter that the wolves had killed and load it with poison for their return.

But there is this to be said for the wolves and coyotes. They did not start killing calves, lambs and colts until the bison herds were wiped out. The bison calves were their natural prey and the vast herds of American buffalo kept them in fat supply.

When the white man slaughtered the bison and replaced them with cows he simply invited the wolf to change his menu!

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 156)

luck he has, the harder you're going to laugh.

All in all, it's an issue to uphold GIANT WESTERN'S tradition of bringing you the best in western fiction that we can rope and corral.

THE MAIL BAG

THE Buffalo Bill story still draws comments from readers and the old Ramrod is plumb tickled at the way you folks have responded to our little experiment. Here's an interesting letter:

I am writing you about THE MIRACULOUS FRONTIERSMAN, for as things happen, I have had some experience with Buffalo Bill. I was with the show from 1895 to 1898. After it came back from the old country, I joined it again in 1902, but then left and went to the World's Fair in St. Louis.

William Cody was a showman of the first water. He had four white stallions and a fine sorrel horse given to him by General Nelson A. Miles.

All your stories are fine. I am retired now and have lots of time for reading. In the June number I liked HIGHWAY TO HELL and NO GUNS FOR HIRE especially.

—Chas. H. Stevens, Sacramento, Cal.

Isn't that a fine letter from a real old-timer? There aren't many people around who remember Buffalo Bill. Sorry Mr. Stevens didn't think to tell us about the color of Buffalo Bill's hair, to settle that little argument we had in the last issue. But anyway, thanks for writing us, Mr. Stevens. You're welcome any time at all, and we sure hope you continue to enjoy the stories in GIANT WESTERN.

I've got only one gripe about the stories in GIANT WESTERN—there aren't enough of them. Sure, I know the magazine is king size, but it could be twice as big and I'll still be sorry when I turn the last page. So how about making it twice as big?"

—Chester A. Summers, Duluth, Minn.

Shucks, boy, do you really mean that? Why, if we made GIANT WESTERN twice as big you'd have to hire a man to carry it around for you. And you'd need a special table to prop it up for reading. You sure wouldn't be able to hold it on your lap. Or are you pulling a whizzer on little old us?

[*Turn page*]

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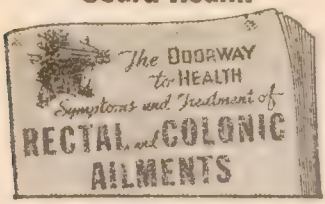

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The two long stories in the June issue were swell—I mean NO GUNS FOR HIRE and HIGHWAY TO HELL. Michener especially is a top hand with the typewriter. But you know what gave me the most kick? Three of the shorts. IN VICTORIO'S COUNTRY was darn near as good as the same author's DUTCHMAN'S FLAT and that was the best western story ever written by anyone anywhere. POOR COOTER was a swell, funny job and KILLER'S PATTERN was clever. When you can line up a swell bunch of shorts with two such good long stories you've got a first rate magazine.

—William Erskine, Rahway, N. J.

Yep, ain't it a fact. 'Course, Bill, you overlooked the other two stories in that issue, which were darned good, but on the whole, we're satisfied. Thank yuh kindly.

Rex Sherrick overlooks one thing in his story about rodeo on page 158 of the June number. The rodeo contestant may wind up broke, even injured and crippled up. But he's not in it to make money, any more than an actor is in the theatre or movies mostly to make money. It's the glamor of the game that gets 'em and that keeps them going even if they're broke and starving and sick and miserable. They'll never change to anything else and they'll never quit the game as long as they can keep going. And a little applause in that old arena is the reward they really want, not so much the money.

—Blacky Williams, Fargo, S. Dak.

You're right, Blacky. Our Mr. Sherrick was talking about the money angle and how the professional contestant came out after some years in the game. He didn't mention the lure of the arena because he thought it was pretty self-evident. Kids who are stage struck might think occasionally of the possible financial rewards, but mostly it's the fame and glamor that gets 'em. Thanks for chipping in a worth-while note to the discussion.

Before signing off, I have some news for readers who are enthusiastic about horses—and who isn't? Visalia Abbe, the 4 year old pacer of the Craig Cimarron ranch, plays "Dan Patch" in the new picture, "The Great "Dan Patch," released by United Artists. Dennis O'Keefe and Gail Russell are the stars of this film about the life of the world's champion pacer. A "must" for horse lovers and sport fans.

And that just about winds us up for another issue, pards. Write a letter or even a postcard to your old Ramrod and let's hear what you've got to say about the magazine. Just address The Ramrod, GIANT WESTERN MAGAZINE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. See you next issue and thanks, everybody!

—THE RAMROD.

Last Call for Dinner

—on the Old-Time Dining Cars

By SAM BRANT

THE dining car on western trains was as democratic, in its own way, as the other customs of the new country. The conductor would frequently come into a passenger coach and make an announcement.

"Gents, the dining car is fresh out of meat. If there is anybody in here with a Winchester, we've just raised a bunch of antelope."

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A train which ran along a river might stop every few minutes while the passengers blazed away at wild geese and hopped down to pick up their bag. The lavishness of wild life in the early west made possible a menu which was a gourmet's dream—and because of the obliging nature of the passengers, to say nothing of train schedules, was provided at no cost to the railroad.

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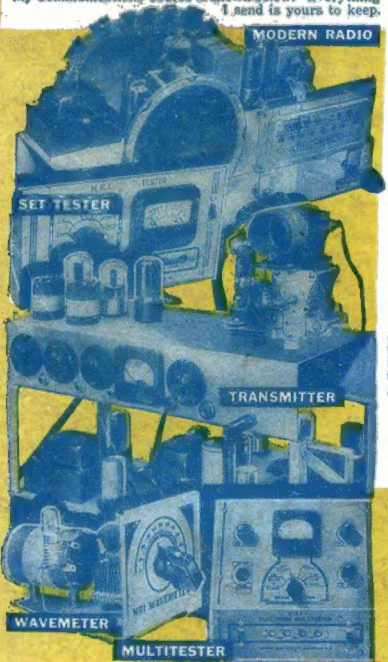

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